

Love our Enemies?

from the pulpit of
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Romans 12:9-18

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Luke 6:27-38

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

If you have been in worship here these last three weeks, you may have noticed that Luke's gospel has focused our attention on what it means to be the church; on who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ together, and in service to the world? We began with Jesus' Call to the Disciples to push out into deep water, and be the kind of community that explores the depths of faith, and doubt, and to wrestle with difficult issues for a world in which religious practice can often be surface and shallow.

Last week, the leper whom Jesus heals invited us to consider how the church is called to address the epidemic of loneliness in our contemporary culture, and how God wants all people to be restored to abundant life in human community. So those texts, challenging us to be broadly inclusive and deeply engaged in our time of division and alienation, served as a sort of preamble for today. Today, we have this most difficult commandment from the lips of Jesus, to love our enemy. Think for a moment about who you would consider your enemy... Who is the enemy Jesus is commanding you to love?

Some time ago I remember reading about a surprise discovery when the fort at Jamestown, Virginia, was excavated. Historians had long thought the fort faced inland with the expectation that the European settlers most feared the Native Americans coming at them through the woods toward their settlement along the James River. But when archeologists uncovered and mapped the almost 400 year old ruins, they discovered the fort faced the river, not the woods. The settlers actually feared other Europeans, people more like themselves, coming upstream by boat to attack, than the Native Americans. I wonder if, in similar fashion, were we to brush back some debris, we might discover that we lack clarity about who our enemies are today.

As my good colleague Rebecca pointed out to me, later in Luke's gospel, when Jesus commands the listening crowd to love their neighbor, a lawyer steps forward and says, "Who is my Neighbor?" And Jesus responds saying, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who beat him and left him in the ditch.... As in the story of the Good Samaritan, I wish some lawyer had stepped forward in today's text

and had asked Jesus, “Who is my enemy?” and Jesus would have answered with a parable saying, “Once upon a time...” and we’d have a story to imagine ourselves walking around in. But today’s scripture reading requires us to decipher on our own; even the examples of who the enemy is, do not exactly fit our current worldview. Today’s enemy is not as easy to identify as the guy who strikes your face in the town square or the one engaging a lending dispute at the village gate.

Were we to poll this congregation asking, “Who is your enemy?” the answers would range from Russia to ISIS to North Korea; from President Trump to the relentless opponents of Trump; from Fox News to MSNBC to Facebook; from organized entities like the NRA to generalized ones of pervasive racism and xenophobia. Some of our folk would, no doubt, identify the enemy more personally – from illness to infertility to the family member who is tearing the family asunder. If we took our archeological tools from Jamestown to the mirror, my guess is many might admit that the enemy sometimes also looks awfully like us. Because a first century definition of *enemy* – one who strikes your face or owes you money – does not translate to our context precisely, we need to interpret this text with fresh eyes, asking: who is our enemy – today? And when we hear Jesus say, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also,” we also have to acknowledge – sadly – that the phrase “turn the other cheek” has perpetuated domestic violence all over Christendom, and we have to be careful not to read this as – just take what comes your way passively. Jesus has put before us a universal call to resist the urge to retaliate; and actively love even those we might otherwise hate, and it’s hard and serious and complex and as much needed a commandment to heed in our time, as it was in the first century.

The current cover story of *The Atlantic* is “Why Are We So Angry?” The author acknowledges that we have always been an angry nation – we were founded by Revolution after all, and ordinary anger – properly expressed can deepen moral indignation that can still be a powerful force for good. But anger that, rather than making things better, becomes a cycle of recrimination, and expands fury to what researchers call “the revenge impulse” breaks down acceptable modes of justice and fairness. The article notes,

“Recently... the tenor of our anger has shifted. It has become less episodic and more persistent, a constant drumbeat in our lives. It is directed less often at people we know and more often at distant groups that are easy to demonize. ... our anger has built within us, exerting an unwanted pressure that can have a dark consequence: the desire not merely to be heard, but to hurt those we believe have wronged us.”¹

In our current political climate, I think all of us are convicted by Jesus’ commandment to love our enemies. Enemies in Jesus’ day are variously identified as Romans, Gentiles, Galilean village neighbors who don’t repay their debts, as well as outsiders and opponents of Jesus’ followers. As one biblical scholar writes, “The quest to find one applicable situation seems futile,” but there is scholarly consensus that enemies include personal, national and religious enemies. They were usually treated with the hostility they had shown. Jesus is using hyperbolic language to say, the behavior of your enemy should not determine your own. Resist the universal urge to retaliate.

The love commanded here is not passivity, but counter-actions – surprising counter-intuitive, countercultural ways of showing love to enemy. “Offering the other cheek does not betoken passivity, weakness, or submission. Rather it is an act of self-assertion that counters that intent to humiliate.” If someone struck you in the face twice, people would see the oppressor as unusually cruel. Giving up your tunic, as well as your coat, would leave one naked before the oppressor – not likely in 1st century Palestine.² These counter actions are intended to be so bizarre as to disarm. Jesus is not telling people to be passive victims, but using hyperbolic examples, he is saying find new ways to resist evil. Choose love over revenge.

¹ Charles Duhigg, “Why Are We So Angry? The untold story of American rage and where it’s taking us,” *The Atlantic*, January-February, 2019, p. 62-75.

² Warren Carter, “Love Your Enemies,” *Word and World*, Vol. 28, Number 1, Winter, 2008, p. 14.

You remember just last fall, on October 27, 2018, Robert Bowers walked into the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, shot and killed eleven people and wounded six. He was shot by police and taken to Allegheny General Hospital, during which he continued to shout anti-Semitic remarks. Before the 44-count indictment was being prepared to include charges of murder, hate crimes, obstructing the practice of religion and other crimes, to which Bowers would plead not guilty, he was treated by at least three Jewish doctors and nurses who saved his life.

His primary hospital nurse, Ari Mahler wrote: “So now, here I am, the Jewish nurse that cared for Robert Bowers... I’ve watched them talk about me on CNN, Fox News, PBS and the local news stations. I’ve read articles mentioning me in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The fact that I did my job, a job which requires compassion and empathy over everything, is newsworthy to people because I’m Jewish. Even more so because my dad’s a rabbi.” Mahler did not go into great detail, because of privacy rules, but he wrote that the gunman “thanked me for saving him, for showing him kindness, and for treating him the same way I treat every other patient... This was the same Robert Bowers that just committed mass homicide. The same Robert Bowers who instilled panic in my heart worrying my parents were two of his 11 victims less than an hour before his arrival. I’m sure he had no idea I was Jewish. Why thank a Jewish nurse, when 15 minutes beforehand, you’d shoot me in the head with no remorse? I didn’t say a word to him about my religion. I chose not to say anything to him the entire time. I wanted him to feel compassion. I chose to show him empathy. I felt that the best way to honor his victims was for a Jew to prove him wrong. Besides, if he finds out I’m Jewish, does it really matter? The better question is, what does it mean to you?” Mahler wrote in conclusion: “If my actions mean anything, love means everything.”³

The life Jesus commands us to live is not easy. We are living in a time when our presumed enemies are prevalent. Far off and close by. Known and unknown. We have to wrestle with this commandment to love and what it

³ Martin Pengelly, “Nurse Who Treated Pittsburgh Shooter,” Nov. 4, 2018, theguardian.com

means for each of us all the time. It is not just the haters out there who are seeking revenge and retaliation. Sometimes it is we ourselves.

Jesus is calling all of us to expand the circle of our concern beyond the narrow boundaries of our own group or tribe. Most of all, he asks us to sacrifice our long-cherished sense of self-righteousness and aggrievement toward our enemies, rendering them in the process not enemies at all, but fellow sinners forgiven by God. Stern though the call may be, greater still is the promise.

We are blessed and we have been invited into the realm of the children of God. By implication, that call holds an even more startling hope: by loving, lending, giving, forgiving, and showing mercy: we enter the very life of God. To quote Jesus closing argument in our text: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

AMEN.