

Seeking to Love
Jubilee Mennonite Church
February 19, 2017

Purpose: To relate ourselves to the call to love the enemy in a deeper way.

Message: We are called into the loving response not to be nice, but to be faithful to who we are as disciples of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48 [I will read], Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Psalm 119:33-40, 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 (please read/have read)

Synopsis: We have all heard at one time or another that we are to love our enemies. But seldom do we really confess that we do, indeed, have enemies. We either place enemies in another place away from us, those who our nation or our politics wants to destroy and call other, or we simply deny that we have them in the first place. Enemies for us are those with whom we do not want to be like, be controlled by, or are in opposition too. Having confessed that we do indeed have enemies, we are invited by Christ to think creatively about how we encounter our disliked other. We have choices of the power we are going to give to the other, and what we will allow ourselves to give in to the enemy in how we, in turn, hate. Loving our enemies asks us to seek Christ in all things, even our conflicts.

Matthew 5:38-48

Concerning Retaliation

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Love for Enemies

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,[a] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said,
'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;
⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your shirt as well;
⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you,
and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

⁴⁴ But I say to you,
Love your enemies and
pray for those who persecute you,
⁴⁵ so that you may be children of God in heaven;
for YHWH makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?
Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, ¹
what more are you doing than others?

Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

⁴⁸ Be perfect; fully developed, complete therefore,
as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Hi my name is Bryce. I have enemies. It's shameful to admit, I know, but there it is; I have an enemy—more than one even. It is just so embarrassing to say. I started for me at a very young age, opposing my brother in the sandbox. Somehow, it just came so naturally. And before you know it, I kept on having enemies. I was addicted. There was Travis in High School who I argued about EVERYTHING with and who kept trying to outdo each other time and again. He just made my blood boil. It's not like I didn't try to do favors for him. Once, I offered to use his drum stick as a deep body probe after hearing him refer to a friend of mine with a racial slur at a band event. It was an offer that I was intent on fulfilling. There were more then, and throughout the years. I have felt many people as enemies through the years. Sometimes, I don't even know their names, never actually met them, but they became those who were in opposition to me; my enemies. I can just see their faces, hear their voices on the radio or TV, or just read their opinion online and I know that they are my enemy, as I feel my stomach tighten, and my righteous indignation flame. Other times, people have had faces and names. I have even known people I know and care about as enemies as I felt them in opposition or judgment. I am not proud of my enemy record. Sometimes I have gotten past knowing them as enemy. Sometimes, I have not. But I know now that it is only by confessing the fact that I do indeed have enemies, that I can deal with my addiction. Thank you for hearing my confession.

We have enemies. It might be a bit of stretch to speak this to begin with, especially in church, but we know it is true. I am guessing that at least one name, face, situation is likely in most of your minds right now, that you could name them if I were to put a microphone in your face. We don't want to admit it because to admit that we have those who we feel are opposed to us and us to them, we have failed. We hear these "be ye perfect" words and just sort of lock up. For people who proclaim to be about the gospel of peace, it is not nice, not clean, ordinary or all that acceptable to admit that we have enemies. So we do what humans are best at; we equivocate, spin, redefine, and outright lie to keep ourselves from the truth of our situation. Well, we don't get along. I don't like them. But they can't be my enemies. We might cop to some remote, ideological sort of Enemies of our society—like ISIS—the unknowable and unknown other that we are to be afraid of as a general rule of self preservation and social expectation, but seldom anything that we ourselves are responsible for. But we have relationships, some which work, and other who don't. Therefore, we have enemies, whether we wish to say so or not. Admitting a problem is the first step to solving it, after all.

Within the words of the Sermon on the Mount, to a great degree these are our words; this is our text. Growing up in the church I was fed stories of enemy love with my soft cereal, displaying the fundamental values of love that my parents wanted to pass on. We have whole books of those who gave their lives rather than recant this gospel, making a hero out of a man named Dirk Willems who, having escaped his captors over an icy Dutch river, returned to rescue his pursuer who fell through the ice, only to be put to death days later for his belief in love of enemy. With a heritage such as this, it can feel down right repetitive to speak of what this all means, commending it to our practice.

But we know we need exactly that—practice. Love is never easy, even with people you like, let alone those who you loath. We don't want to take this too seriously because it is always painful to contemplate what they mean for us. Which is why so few Christian churches hold them as particularly core teachings. Love of enemy is always there sure, but there are often foot notes. Like “not to be practiced in the case of the State having an enemy in war” or “nice idea, but reserved for 3rd level saints only”. Martin Luther, the founder of this whole grand movement we call Protestantism 500 years ago this year argued that the teachings Jesus gave us in the sermon on the mount were given precisely because they are entirely unrealistic and impossible, and turn us then toward God's grace as we realize how completely hopeless we are at following them. The radical thing about Anabaptist thought when it comes to the teaching of Christ, is that we have long held that these teachings, especially those in the Sermon on the Mount, are meant for us. These words are meant to be lived, and breathed, and practiced in the here and now, among all people who would claim the name of Christ. This is pretty far out there out there—it was then, and still is.

The commands of loving enemies, and praying for those who persecute us in love asks of us deep, and often troubling questions. These are personal questions, lived out in real ways, in real lives, with real consequences. Loving one's enemies does not necessarily translate into being loved in return. There turning the other cheek may well translate into being struck, emotionally, psychologically, as well as physically. Giving to those who ask it of you may well lose you money on a regular basis. It is not accidental that the stories that we so often tell involve in tragedy one way or another. It must be said loudly and clearly that this command has too often been used as a foil to justify the worst kind of abuse within and often by the church. Never should we think ourselves as required to needlessly suffer, nor abet the abuse of others. These words are about the liberation from and standing up against abuse, all

the while not become, in turn, abusers. When we twist the commands of the Lord to suit our own individual aims, we are guilty of the worst possible sin. It is never easy to answer the question of what it means to love the enemy. It asks, deep, personal, provocative questions, and sometimes, yes, it invites us to suffer if we so chose. But it does invite us into a way of being that is truly new and different than most anything else the world has ever known

These words suffer because we read them in our context and our time. Our literalism has causes us to think that a rigid suffering of pain is what is being meant here. But what we lack is an understanding of what Jesus might be referring to here. Like striking on the cheek. In the honour culture of the ancient near east, this was the supreme insult. Especially with an open hand. The civil penalty for striking someone with an open hand was the equivalent to a year's wages. By turning the left cheek, you are asking someone to be that much more susceptible to the dishonour of being the aggressor in such a case. Similarly, while the soldiers of Rome were able to impress citizens for a time to carry their packs, there were strict limits on the extent to which this could be done, and this was reframing the terms of engagement to change the conversation entirely. There were Jewish laws about who could take a garment from someone else and for how long. With this in mind, Jesus is suggesting something more than strict passive acceptance of what our enemies dish out (though that is an option) but rather a way of reframing the interaction and changing the terms of engagement, all the while saving ourselves from the fruitless cycle of violence that so often traps us in petty one-up-manship and destruction in which no one is victorious.

Changing the terms of engagement can be surprisingly effective. As a high school band member, one had to put up with a certain level of hazing, both officially and unofficially. I had the misfortune of having my older brother in the band as a senior when I was a freshman which did not ease my way in. I had a target on me from day one. One of the fun games that they would play was stuff the first year into the instrument locker, an open bared cage like a kennel where I was to be kept until their fun had been satisfied. And so it went for some weeks on a more or less daily basis. Until, that is, I took action. On seeing the leader of the gang appointed for such duty coming for his fun, I simply climbed in the locker of my own accord, pulling the door shut behind me. His resisting victim being taken away, he did not know what do with himself, and fell over laughing at the situation. That was the last time I was stuffed in a locker, and this guy still talks to me about it to this day. I reacted outside the

expectation. I changed the script and that made all the difference. And I did so without becoming the enemy myself.

I think we minimize the value of these two results. Changing the script, how the interaction and cycle work does change the relationship. It unbalances things. I am not talking here about some grand one-up-manship that would outdo the other at all costs, but something that defuses the situation, changes the equations of how we interact does indeed change people's lives and the relationships that underlie them. Turning the other cheek sometimes is really quite effective. But is also saving to us. Because to be truly involved in conflict asks us to make an enemy of the other. And that has a cost too. There is a science to this: to really do the enemy thing well, you have to dehumanize the enemy, make them to beyond the pale, beyond love, and beyond God's love. It asks us to carry all that hatred, energy, and violence on ourselves, and demands that we invest in the cycles of aggression and response that we know all too well. And that is just quite demanding. It costs a lot to maintain a good enmity. The hatred, the passion, the anxiety, the plotting, and all the rest. It demands that we keep investing holding up our end of the conflict. It can be quite costly, spiritually, personally, and even financially. Much of our economy functions on the basis of the assumption that there is someone out there that wants to get you. What happens when we release that, and free ourselves to do what we are ultimately called to do with ALL of ourselves: Love God with heart mind and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves.

As familiar as these words may be, we do well to keep them in front of us, with their invitation to think creatively and openly about how to deal with the conflict that infects us all. How might Enemy love call us, yet again, to something new that gives life abundantly, even in those areas where we least expect it? May we each be given the creative grace to see how we might deal with our enemy addictions in new ways, reflecting the kingdom in even this most common element of life and living.