

“Anger Management Graduate School: Loving Your Enemies as a Way to Health”

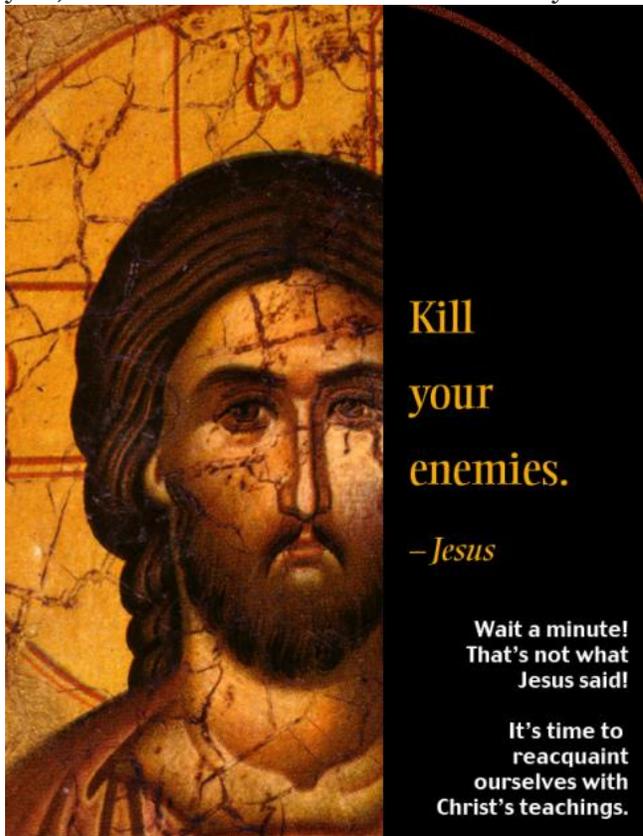
Rev. Murray Richmond

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The call to love our enemies is not just a platitude to make Christianity look good; it is a practical way to live, especially if our worst enemy is ourselves!

GOSPEL MATTHEW 5:38-48

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other



also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give 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.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers

and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Right after 9/11 I got an email from a member of my church. As you may remember, the planes hit the twin towers on Tuesday, and I got the email on a Thursday. Basically the email

said, “I hope you are not planning one of those “Love your enemy” sermons this week. That would be an insult to everyone in the church.”

Well, I had not planned to preach on the text we just heard the Sunday after 9/11, mostly because the wounds were still very fresh, but I think the email shows the struggle we have with this text. On one hand, we like to hold it up as the apex of Christian love. This is a passage that really does set Christianity aside. While you can find passages like this in other religions, they are not as overt as this.

On the other hand, this is perhaps one of the hardest verses in the whole of Scripture. Last week we talked about getting along when there is conflict between you and friend. This week we are talking about loving enemies—not inconvenient people, but enemies, real enemies. This is graduate school.

In my college days I had several friends who were Muslims. We usually did not talk about religion, but one day one of these friends said, “You know what the problem with Christianity is?” I thought he would bring up the Trinity, because we had already had a very confusing discussion on that topic (and I have to admit that I had created most of the confusion!) But that, to him, was not the problem.

“It’s all that ‘love your enemy’ stuff,” he said. “It makes you weak. It makes you weak for two reasons. It makes you weak because when you have an enemy, you are supposed to destroy him, not love him. And it makes you weak because you talk about it, you preach about loving your enemy, but you never really do it.”

The Greeks and the Romans had the same problem with Christianity. You know there are four words for love in the Greek language; Eros, which means romantic love, Philia, which means brotherly love, storge, which is friendship, and agape, which is unconditional love. Agape is the word Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount when he says love your enemies. The word agape was rarely used in Greek and Roman literature, because it was seen as the weakest and least desirable form of love. It was the love of slaves, not masters.

And to be honest, my Muslim friend was mostly right. This is a verse we like to quote occasionally, but not a verse we like to follow.

This morning I want to show that this verse may be more practical than we realize, and that it deserves more than to be relegated to the dustbin of sentimental, but impossible sayings of Jesus. This is not hopeful optimism about a utopian future, but good advice for getting through life on a daily basis.

Let me say that I am aiming this sermon at the same people Jesus aimed the Sermon on the Mount at—people who are interested in loving God, in being a follower of Jesus. There has been an ongoing debate throughout history on whether or not loving your enemies is possible for nations. I'm not going there this morning. I am not going to talk about how America can love its enemies. I'm going to talk about how WE, you and I, can love OUR enemies. There are reasons for that. First, this is a sermon, and not a lecture, and I think a sermon should concern your daily lives. Second, when it comes to politics, the church has been arguing over this verse for fifteen hundred years, and I am not going to settle that debate this morning. I would be glad to do a lecture about this one Sunday evening, but not here in worship. This morning I am going to give a sermon, not a lecture.

That said, the first practical thing about the call to love our enemies is that it keeps us from being reactive. Let me explain. There is a part of our brains called the amygdala which determines our basic responses. It is responsible for our fears, our anxiety, and our basic sexual instincts. When you freeze, or run away from a situation you amygdala is in control. We call that the lizard part of our brains, because a reptile's brain is mostly just this area.

Look at two toddlers playing. One wants a toy that the other has, so he just takes it. The other child gets angry, and takes it back, so the first kid hits him, and retakes the toy. Or the toy is taken, and the child cries.

That is the amygdala in action. When you get into fight with someone, and they say something, and you react by either storming off, or saying something back without thinking, that is your lizard brain in action.

Now as humans, we have complex brains, and the lizard brain is only a small part of our cerebral system. We don't have to do what our lizard brain tells us to do. We can get scared, but still show courage. We can get sexually aroused, but not act on it. And we can get angry, and not retaliate.

In other words, we can be responsive, without being reactive. Reactive is when our lizard brain takes over. Last week I talked about getting angry at someone and calling them up. When I made that call, the lizard part of my brain was in full gear, and it was sending me all sorts of signals—none of them good.

But you see, we have another part of our brain, which I am going to call the Wizard brain, and the wizard brain is that part that says, "I know your boss just made you angry when he said you had to work this weekend, but don't hit him with the stapler." When your child has been acting up, the lizard part of your brain wants to yell at them, or even hit them, but the

Wizard part of our brains keep us from saying, “If you keep crying I am going to give you something to cry about!”

When Jesus says; “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also,” he is saying that we need to listen to our Wizard brain, not our Lizard brain. When we get hit, we react by hitting back. And Jesus is saying, “Do not be reactive. Be responsive.”

Reactive comebacks are rarely helpful comebacks. When we are reactive, we are not totally in control of our actions. We say things that we know we shouldn’t say. We do things we know we shouldn’t do. A reactive response rarely makes a bad situation better, and it often makes a bad situation worse. I remember getting in to a fight with my first wife, and saying to her, “You are acting just like your mother.” I KNEW I should not have said that, but my lizard brain was in control. And needless to say, that was NOT the right thing to say.

And one of the biggest problems in relationships today is that people get reactive. And when they get reactive, it is rarely a good outcome, whether it is a marriage, a work situation, a friendship, or church committee, getting reactive is not helpful. If it sounds like I have talked about this before, I have. When I worked with kids at the Presbyterian Hospitality House, I quickly learned that most of them were there because they were reactive, and not responsive. Their lizard brains were in control, and that got them in trouble. We had to teach them to be responsive, to listen to the Wizard brain, not the lizard brain.

When we are reactive, we are not in control, but when we are responsive, we are in control. You cannot be reactive and love your enemy. It is impossible. Your lizard brain is incapable of any love.

Now here is the good news. We control our responses. If hit, we are capable of responding by turning the other cheek. We just have to practice using our Wizard brains. If someone does something to hurt me, I can lash out, but what good will that do? Or I can choose my response, based on what would be best in the situation.

When Jesus says we are to love our enemies, he is saying, Use your Wizard brain, not your lizard brain!

Now the second way this passage is practical is closely tied to the first. You may be wondering who your enemies are? You maybe be saying, I don’t have any enemies. An enemy is someone who is out to get you. And they intend to hurt you somehow.

But we have a lot of opponents. An opponent is someone who disagrees with us. We have a lot of those people in our lives. If you are a Democrat, your opponent is the Republicans, and vice versa. If you are on the side of management, your opponent is labor. If you are theologically progressive, your opponents are conservatives.

But one thing I have noticed these days, is that opponents can quickly become enemies. I may disagree with you on a political, or theological matter, but that does not make me your enemy, and yet we are quick to draw lines.

It has been said that people can actually live without a god, but not without a devil. We can be quick to demonize our opponents. We need someone on the other side and we need to them to be really bad people. One of the easiest ways to organize people is to set them against a common enemy. If I really wanted to draw you together as a congregation, I would find someone or something that we could all hate, some enemy, and we would work together to destroy our enemy.

If you are in the Tea Party, then liberals are not just people who disagree with you, they are ruining our country. If you are a liberal, Tea Party folks are the ones ruining our country. And both organizations make a lot of money demonizing the other side.

If you believe in traditional marriage, then those people who believe in same sex marriage are ruining the institution of marriage, and if you believe in same sex marriage, then those people who don't agree are homophobic, and destroying civil rights. And again, a lot of people are making a lot money by manipulating people into being enemies on this issue.

We tend to draw lines, we put people on the other side of those lines, and we make them an enemy.

Is this the way God wants us to work out our differences? Is this God's best intentions for humanity? Did God want HIS church to squabble and split over who can get married, or how we do communion, or what music we sing? Did God imagine Right Wing and Left Wing churches? Did Jesus imagine that one day His body would be split into a million different pieces, and that Christians would take pride in how much they despised other Christians? Did Jesus imagine that we would one day define our righteousness by which other Christians we look down on?

We will always have people who disagree with us. That is a given. But do they need to be our enemies? Can we live without devils? Can we be better than that?

And that brings us to my last point. Who is the biggest enemy we face? We have met the enemy, and he is us.

We are our own worst enemies. Nine times out of ten, what we say about our enemies is also true of us. Not always, but often. When we judge someone else, we condemn ourselves. Is there a person here without fault? Of course not. Is there a person here who is beyond the love of God? Of course not. Are your enemies without fault? Of course not. Are you enemies beyond the love of God? Of course not.

Jesus ends this part of the Sermon on the Mount by saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Now that sounds impossible, but you need to know the word Jesus uses for perfect is *telios*, which really means whole, or mature, or ripe. Being perfect does not mean that we do not have faults. It means we accept them.

It took me years to learn it, but did you know that God loves me, not in spite of my faults, but that God loves me, faults and all? As a matter of fact, without my faults, God cannot use me?

You see, I want to deal with my faults by rejecting them. And usually when I do that, I end also rejecting people who have the same faults I do. We tend to despise in others what we despise in ourselves. Or we just despise ourselves. Neither is healthy. And what we can accept about others is what we can accept about ourselves. It is no accident that the first principle of AA, or of any twelve step program is to accept that you are an alcoholic, or that you have problems.

But when we have faults, rather than reject those who have same faults, and make an enemy of them, or to reject ourselves, God wants us to put our faults into his loving hands. Because then God can really go to work on us. The Christian life is not a self-help program where we work on erasing our faults so we will one day be good enough for God. It is about accepting the love of God AS WE ARE, and letting God work on us.

You know Michelangelo’s statue of David? It is a majestic, towering, strong figure of David. When he was carving, Michelangelo said he wanted to portray the David who protected his sheep by slaying lions.

The irony of that statue is that it is a flawed piece of marble. After it was mined from the quarry it was discovered to have a huge crack running through it. It was a beautiful piece of

marble, with the exception of that crack, which made it useless. So the city of Florence had a contest to see if their best sculptors could do anything with it. Michelangelo spent hours studying it, and from the crack, from the flaw, came up that strange pose of David. His legs are at a funny angle, and they are at that angle because of the flaw in the marble. But that stance is what gives David his power.

God takes the flaws in our lives, and if we are willing, God will work within us to make something beautiful of that flaw.

As to the flaws in others, that is between them and God. We cannot fix ourselves by fixing others, nor can avoid our own flaws by focusing on the flaws of others.

The call to love our enemies is the call to a very challenging life. It is not easy, especially when we are the enemies we are called to love. But it is a practical life, and in the end, a rewarding and sane life.