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# What About the Enemy?

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*You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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 (Matthew 5:43-45).*

When I get to the part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says to love your enemies, I ask myself who would fall into that category. Who are my enemies, after all?

If an enemy is someone who hates you, or tries to harm you, or even someone who is always antagonistic, I have a hard time coming up with any human being that I would consider a personal enemy. If such a person exists, he's keeping a low profile. At the same time, I can't think of anyone that I'm personally hostile towards. There are people who do things I don't like, and some of their actions range from mildly annoying to deeply reprehensible in my mind. I'd like them to change their behaviors, and when I can, I try to encourage them to do that. But I can't think of any particular person that I would call an enemy.

What about you? Are there individuals that you think of as enemies? I'm not talking about enemies on a larger scale—people who hate our country, for example. We'll come back to them in a few minutes, but for the moment I'm just inviting you to think about personal relationships. Are there people who feel like enemies, individuals for whom some sort of hostility flows between you, in one direction or the other, or both? If you can't think of anyone, then that's a great blessing. But if there is someone in your life who feels

like an enemy, the question Jesus poses is, what are you going to do about that?

Jesus says we're supposed to love those people. That's another one of his commandments that show how different Jesus' ethics are from conventional human wisdom. He understands that, of course, which is why he begins by saying, "You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy...." Jesus knows that retaliating against enemies seems so obvious that to suggest otherwise sounds naïve and unrealistic. Jesus is often considered unrealistic by people who think they know the real world better than he does.

But Jesus is not naïve. He knows the world better than any of us, because, if Christianity is true and Jesus really is the Word of God made flesh, he in fact *made* the world. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows what works and what doesn't work in human relations. And more than that, he knows the will of God, and the final judgment God has in store for all humankind.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he's telling us to do something God already does. "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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." It isn't that God is soft on crime. No one hates sin and evil more than our Creator. But God knows that the only power strong enough to conquer evil is love, and if people are ever going to stop doing bad things it will only be because someone loved them enough to show them a better way.

And that, of course, is just what God does. As St. Paul reminds us, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Jesus practices what he preaches. And Jesus says, if we are truly going to become children of God, we must learn to treat people the way God treats us—which means, among other things, that we have to learn to love our enemies.

Now loving our enemies does not mean condoning bad behavior, or letting people get away with it. If someone is abusive, we don't have to tolerate the abuse, and we may need to get out of that relationship. If somebody slanders us with false accusations, we can defend our reputation. If a person spreads lies, we can refute those lies by telling the truth.

When Jesus says to turn the other cheek if someone slaps you, I think he means it in the narrowest, most literal sense. Sometimes refusing to hit back can shock a person into seeing his own bad behavior. There's a moral power, a "soul force," as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. knew, in not retaliating blow for blow. Physical violence is often moral weakness masquerading as strength, and nonviolent resistance can sometimes cause that mask to fall off.

When Jesus says, "Do not resist evildoers," he doesn't mean we should not resist evil itself. Jesus fights evil all the time, and so should his disciples. But resisting evil doesn't mean striking back in the same way: an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. There's a kind of moral judo that uses the aggressor's own force against him, so that everyone can see the evil of his actions, and at least some people will rise up to stand against it.

We can love our enemies on a personal level, not by tolerating bad behavior, but by separating the sin from the sinner and refusing to repay evil with evil. St. Paul says again, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." If we retaliate by committing evil of our own, then evil still wins in the end. God's people are to hate evil, but not the individuals who commit it.

That's often a hard distinction to make, since most of the evil in the world is done by human beings. It's easy to identify people with their most conspicuous actions, especially if that's all we know about them. A person who commits a crime may be just another criminal to his victims, or to society as a whole, but to his mother he's still a son who made some terrible choices. Even when people must the penalty for their actions, they're still somebody's son or daughter, still children of the heavenly Father.

We human beings are more than the worst things we've ever done. That's true for individuals, and it's even more true for whole groups of people. Persons cannot be reduced to the worst things done by others who bear some similarity of nation, race, religion, or class. The dictionary definition of a bigot is "one who regards or treats the members of a group (as a racial or ethnic group) with hatred and intolerance." The temptation to bigotry is great in our day, when there's so much violence in the world, and so much fear and anger. But Jesus says it's wrong to hate even our real enemies. How much worse, then, in the eyes of God to hate those who bear some superficial resemblance to our enemies?

And that brings us to the question of people who really are enemies on some larger scale than our personal relationships. There's no doubt that some people in the

world hate our country, for example, and want to do harm to us or to some of our friends and allies. What about them? What is a faithful Christian response to their aggression?

Broadly speaking, Christians have responded in three different ways on matters pertaining to war and peace.

The first response is pacifism, the belief that it's always better to suffer injury than to cause it, and therefore Christians should never take up arms against their enemies. Some forms of pacifism take the personal nonviolence of the Sermon on the Mount and extend it to whole nations. Scholars debate whether pacifism was the principal view among minority Christians before the Roman Empire became nominally Christian under Constantine, but in reality no country has ever been completely pacifistic at the national level.

The second approach, and in many ways the opposite, is holy war, the idea that God is on our side, so that our enemies are God's enemies too, and can therefore be destroyed without any pangs of conscience. Holy war was the mentality of the Christian Crusades, and it's also the mentality of violent Islamic jihad. In fact, the holy war mentality is a perennial temptation of any society that believes in God, for the obvious reason that people want to think God endorses whatever they do, especially when they engage in something as terrible and destructive as war. The dangers of holy war are clear enough in hindsight, though, and we all know that it has led to some of the greatest cruelty in human history.

Christian theologians have long recognized the limitations of pacifism on the one hand and the dangers of holy war on the other, so at least since the time of St.

Augustine, in the early fifth century, a third way of thinking came to be known as "just war" theory. That tradition considers war to be an evil, since war involves the intentional killing of other human beings, but it claims that war may be the lesser of the evils if a number of important conditions are truly met.

In the just war tradition, war must be the last resort, after all other means of resolving conflict have been tried and failed. It has to be for a just cause: to defend against an aggressor, for example. The war must be fought only against combatants, not against whole populations, and the fighting has to be proportional, inflicting no more damage than is absolutely necessary to achieve legitimate ends. It has to be fought with a view to ultimate reconciliation, so that no atrocities or other excesses may poison the prospect of peace in the future. And finally, the most striking thing about just war theory is that, even if Christians go to war in light of all these other criteria, they still must not hate the enemy, because hatred can destroy the souls even of those who win the war.

All of this points again to the way Christians think about our enemies. There are people who want to harm us, and the mainstream of Christian tradition has always thought it legitimate to resist violent aggression. But Christianity at its best has always distinguished between sin and sinners, between evil itself and those who commit acts that are evil. Sinners continue to have the possibility of redemption, after all, and the Bible tells us that God's desire is that everyone might be saved in the end.

If there is an enemy that we are justified in hating, that enemy is evil itself. And here the greatest struggles we face are the ones that go on in our own hearts and minds. The

enemies we have to fight within us are hatred and wrath and anything else that would keep us from loving God and loving other human beings—even those we think of as our enemies.

Jesus ends his little discourse on loving our enemies by saying that we ought to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Here's yet another one of Jesus' sayings that strike us as very strange. Nobody's perfect, we say, and those who think they are only underscore their own imperfection. But once again, translations out of context can be misleading. The Greek word translated "perfect" here is *teleioi*, and it has to do with reaching our purpose in life, arriving at the end, or *telos*, for which we were made. So when Jesus tells us to be perfect, he means we need to press on toward our ultimate goal, which is to become a soul fit for the kingdom of heaven, a soul that can live in peace and harmony with all our neighbors.

We're going to conclude our service this morning by singing the Civil War era song known as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Some people think of it as a hymn in the spirit of holy war, but listen closely to the words and you'll see that it isn't so. The Civil War was fought by brother against brother within our own country. It was a tragic thing, as Lincoln so eloquently said, and the goal of many people was to bind up the nation's wounds when the war was over. What gets trampled out in this great hymn are not our human enemies but "the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored"—that is, wrath and hatred and all the enemies of the human soul.

Those are the things God wants to destroy. The glory of the coming of the Lord will be when evil itself is crushed and driven out of human hearts. Then all that will be left are

souls that love God and love their neighbors, and there will be no such thing in the kingdom of God as any person who can still be called an enemy.

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