

## Love Your Enemies! How Hard!<sup>1</sup>

### I

Years ago, there was a cartoon in The New Yorker that went like this. Here's a picture of this guy kneeling by his bed, in a posture of devout prayer. And he prays, "Lord, I did ask that you would make me love my enemies, that you would make me a good person. ... But apparently you weren't listening!

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Well, "Love your enemies. ... Pray for those who persecute you ... for God is also merciful to the unjust. ... Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." How hard!

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Well, in Jesus' day there were no anger management classes. But there were fists, stones, swords, and even crosses available to press the point-revenge ... ubiquitous – in fact – in all ages. But here, Jesus says, "Love your enemies" instead. Mmm-hmm. That's a toughie alright! Goes against the grain, doesn't it. But then a lot of Christianity goes against the grain when you come right down to it.

See, here's what's IN the grain: We were born with ... inherited from our earliest ancestors as they crawled out of the cave ... you and I were born with a wariness in the face of the stranger. I mean, we bonded together in our own tribe for safety's sake, to ward off the enemy, to guard against outside threat. In order to survive, we learned to band together and aggress against those who might harm us ... or who had already harmed us to keep them from doing it again. 'Cause our very survival depended on it.

So it's in our genes. Still is ... still is there ... I mean you know it, I know it, don't we? So what do we make of this gospel message in this angry age we live in today? I mean, look around you – look at what's playing out in our political arena – folks marching, tweeting, playing to the airwaves.

So we know it in our bones – that hatred for the Other, that aggressive impulse toward the Enemy. So even if the letter of the law might keep us from each other's throats, barely insuring civility – no real change in our hearts is effected by that law – even if the peace is somehow kept.

And yet. Jesus says, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who harm you." And so again, what Jesus asks of us in this passage does go against the grain – mmm hmm. So let's look.

### II

See, I think this is a very hard passage to come to grips with. I think it triggers a lot of ambivalence in us ... or at least in me. I'll speak for myself. Because while the love of enemies is a glorious ideal, on the other hand, I think it's troubling to ponder loving those who not only may hurt you, but also who clearly hurt your neighbors. So. Defending the weaker ones of your tribe is not only in your genes, but I think it's important, and fuels your striving for justice ... prompts you to take to the streets in righteous fury at injustices that rain down on the heads of those who can't fight back.

And of course, think of this: Jesus did have plenty to say about doing justice, feeding the hungry, lifting up the weak and poor. So I do feel ambivalent when I first hear this passage, pondering all the implications.

But still, these are the words we are given this morning. So let's focus on His words here, where Jesus does end this passage by saying, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." So let's think about it. 'Cause actually ... I think both judgment and mercy are part of God's nature.

So maybe Jesus' point here is this: Don't try to usurp God's right to do justice ... to take vengeance. No ... try instead to reflect God's all-inclusive love. Try. I mean, He says Do. Bless. Pray ... Love. One imperative after the other, with no distinction between rich or poor, between hungry or well-fed. Between friend or enemy. Just do it.

So maybe the question for us here – at least in part – is HOW to do it. How do you love an enemy? How do you DO love? And maybe this: Maybe you can't really talk about loving without talking about forgiving. Because I think loving and forgiving in our human, daily lives are linked together. And maybe it's in the forgiving we can come to love ... or try ... try to even like, without judgment, by struggling to understand the enemy's humanity along the way. So let's dig deeper here and see what we can uncover.

### III

Anne Lamott – a humorous, Christian writer – has said something to the effect that hating ... and its cousins, chronic anger ... grudges ... resentment ... are like "... drinking rat poison, and then sitting around, waiting for the rat to die ..." I mean, you just destroy yourself in the process.

In her little book, *Small Victories*, Lamott has a delightful chapter titled "Forgiven." She says "by the time I decided to become one of the ones who are heavily into forgiveness, it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age; everything inside me either recoiled or laughed a little too hysterically."

So she tried to will herself into forgiving various enemies who'd harmed her directly or indirectly ... like two old boyfriends ... a couple of past presidents of the United States, who she'd seen as demonic. But then she remembered C. S. Lewis' advice when he said, "If you really want to learn how to (love your enemies) and forgive them, perhaps you'd better start with something easier than loving the Gestapo." Or for us, the Taliban ... or Isil ... or fill in our own worst enemy who comes to mind!

So Lamott reviewed her list of enemies and searched for someone she barely knew whom she'd hated ... only for a little while – an enemy-lite. And then she launched into a hilariously funny story about her son's best friend's mother. But I won't spoil that for you now. You can read the story yourself. But she says that she had to admit that she – Anne – said some really awful things to herself about this woman – who really, really irritated her, especially because she looked so great in spandex shorts!

And then for some maybe providential reason, almost everywhere Anne looked – bumper stickers, fortune cookies ... a phone reminder from a friend that said, "Don't forget. God loves us exactly the way we are ... and God loves us too much to let us stay this way." Everywhere she looked, she saw these providential little nudges to forgive, to drop it, to learn to love instead.

Still ... she resisted. She kept saying to herself – echoing Sam-I-Am in Green Eggs and Ham – “I could not, would not, forgive her in a box; could not, would not, forgive her with a fox; not on a train, not in the rain.” Anyway, you get her point.

But then ... Jesus' words. “Love your enemies,” forgive those who've hurt you, turn the other cheek ... forgive and you will be forgiven” ... words she heard in church that haunted her. So she decided to try ... to practice forgiveness. To try to forgive this woman who looked so good, haunted her days.

And then she slowly began to see this: She says, “If you want to be forgiven, if you want to experience that kind of love, you have to forgive everyone in your life – everyone, even the very worst boyfriend you ever had – even for God's sake, yourself.”

And she also began to see this: When you're angry, when you hate, maybe your fury says much more about you ... than about the objects of your hatred. True when you're angry at folks who look, who act differently than you do. True when you hate – can't stand those who hold different political or religious views from you. True when you hold grudges against family members or coworkers. True when you internalize anger so much that you alienate someone by cold silence, 'cause anger is destructive to those around you in a thousand daily ways ... and like that rat poison, most destructive to yourself in the process.

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Well, to make a long story short, Lamott stood back from what was going on between her and this woman – this enemy-lite – and began to see what she herself – Anne – was contributing out of her own sense of jealousy, began to see this other person as human and fallible just like herself – and then the walls began to crumble. Anne said she finally understood that she herself – as she put it – was as “mad as a hatter.” That she was the one who thought she was out of shape – looked horrible in spandex shorts! And that she was trying to get this other woman to carry all this baggage for her because it hurt too much to carry it herself.

So finally they – this woman and Anne – had this great coming together over coffee and cookies, and became friends in the end.

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Well it's a human story, a funny story about an enemy-lite ... the kinds of enemies that all of us carry around each day. But what's all this mean? And what's it got to do with today's gospel?

Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them, meaning love – in the sense of willing their life to go well – even so. But it's still a tall order, isn't it? I mean, the longtime employee who's laid off just before he qualifies for retirement with a pension – can he love the folks who call him in to break the news? The mother of the molested child – love the molester?

Well I guess there are enemies and then there are enemies, right? Enemies-lite and enemies-not-so-lite. And see, I think there is such a thing as heroic forgiveness – the kind you read or hear about in the news.

Like parents who can embrace their child's murderer, like some of those at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, struggling to forgive Dylan Roof. So there are cases of heroic forgiveness and love of enemies that just make your jaw drop.

But then there's the more mundane kind of forgiveness like Anne Lamott writes about – a call to all of us in our daily life. So. Finally, let's turn to us.

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See, I think love is not about feelings but about acts. Love is something you do. And if you say, "But I cannot love my enemy," maybe you can bring yourself to the point of no longer hating him or her. It's possible that you may even get to where you can pray for them a little, if only that God forgive them because you yourself cannot. 'Cause I think any prayer for them at all is a major breakthrough.

Why? 'Cause I think praying for enemies involves a serious attempt to try to see them from God's point of view. I mean, I think you cannot earnestly pray for an enemy, without grasping, on some level, your common humanity; that they too have been created in the image of God. And no behavior, no matter how bad, can finally erase that image, 'cause that image ... that's God's doing.

And see, I think that's already the beginning of love. ... And if you say, "I can't even do that" ... then try at least to keep your dislike out of your mouth. That would be a step in the right direction.

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Finally, I think this: What Jesus' words for us this morning demand is not everything or nothing, but a beginning and a continuing, a rising again and plodding on after every fall. And my last words to you: You cannot pray for your enemy without reminding yourself that the God who's able to love you, despite your faults, is also able to love those who may not even like you ... or maybe worse. Seeing your enemy in the light of God's mercy is the first step toward surprising them – and yourself – with compassion.

"Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord." Try love ... instead!

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Resources used: *Matthew by Douglas Hare* (Interpretation series); *Preaching Through the Year of Matthew* edited by Roger Alling and David Schlafer; *Small Victories* by Anne Lamott; *Whistling in the Dark* by Frederick Buechner; *Home By Another Way* by Barbara Brown Taylor.