

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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February 25, 2018
Matthew 5:43 – 48

Giving Up Enemies

“May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, Lord, my rock, and my redeemer” (Ps 19:14). Amen.

We continue this morning with the fifth sermon in our “Give it Up” series, on Giving Up Enemies. I once heard a pastor say that he would continue to preach, so long as the Spirit continued to reveal to him what needed to be changed in *his* life. As I preach this sermon, be assured that I am not preaching *at* you. I am preaching this sermon, fully aware of how difficult it is for *me* to give up my enemies, *and* how critical it is that the Church take Jesus’ command seriously, both individually and corporately.

As my siblings and I were growing up, my dad served in the Air Force as a chaplain. *I* loved the adventure and the newness of moving from place to place, but I was perhaps the only child in my family that loved it. For the rest of my siblings, it was an *incredible* hardship to leave the familiar and the friends they had made along the way.

My dad was last stationed in Great Falls, Montana. The schools were terrific, and many of us had developed strong friendships.

My older sister would be a senior in high school. She had had a difficult time adjusting to the newness of moving, and she was involved in some wonderful choirs in high school.

My parents, through many difficult conversations, decided to offer my sister the option to move with us to California, or to stay with a friend in Montana. Their

only requirement was that she come with us to California for the summer before making her decision. They asked her to pray about the situation, and gave her a deadline.

That summer was a very difficult one, filled with arguments and strife. For many years, my older sister had been my best friend, and I was *thoroughly* upset that she was considering moving back to Montana. I told her that I would *never* make that decision if I were in her shoes; I would move with my family, as I always had. In *my* mind, I had just as many opportunities for success in Montana as my sister, and yet she was not willing to make “the right” decision, as I would.

And she decided to leave. I was *so* angry; I couldn’t stand it. I saw her decision as a decision against me and against our family. *I* now needed to take on the mantle of responsibility for three younger siblings, while my sister went back to Montana to pursue her dreams.

I made a vow that I would not speak to her for the entire *year*. My sister would come home for the major holidays, and I would not speak to her one word. I felt self-righteous *anger*, and I wanted my sister to *pay*. In my mind, she had been entirely selfish, and I wanted her to *know it*. My sister had become to me “enemy number one” for that year.

A few years later, my sister and I talked about that year. She admitted to me that she believed that her decision *was* selfish, yet it had been a very good decision for her.

As she told me this, I breathed a sigh of relief, and felt justified for my anger. But as I thought about it later, I did *not* feel better from my sister's admission; I had missed my *sister*.

Our natural propensity is to seek justice – justice on *our* terms. If someone offends us, they'd better apologize. If someone belittles us on social media, *they* ought to be made little, make a public apology, and broadcast another statement that we are, in fact, *wonderful*. If someone hurts us, we want *them* to hurt, to apologize, and to make it right. We believe that by seeking justice on our terms, we will regain the power we lost and feel at peace. *We believe that by seeking justice on our terms, we will regain the power we lost and feel at peace.*

How many times have I thought, *It would all be better if they just apologized? An apology isn't too much to ask. How can they possibly not see themselves in the wrong? I'll forgive them, just as soon as they apologize and make things right.*

And as I preach this, there are *many* who have experienced incredible pain and tragedy to themselves, their loved ones, or to their people group. How can a person give up his or her enemies, when they have been so wronged, so hurt, so destroyed?

In our Gospel text this morning, we find ourselves in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has called his disciples, and now he instructs them on how to live as the new people of God. His disciples have gathered close, and the crowds overhear the conversation. Much of what Jesus says seems odd, instructing his disciples to go well *beyond* the law in obedience to him.

Jesus says, “You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:43 – 44). Now, the Old Testament law from Leviticus 19:18 said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The verse did *not* include, “And hate your enemy.” *This* addition was one of the religious interpretations of the day, to say, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”¹ Jesus *corrects* this saying and says, “*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matt 5:44).

Jesus is forming a *new* people and is giving them *new* commandments. His commandments, however, do not *abolish* the Old Testament Law, but *fulfill* it. Jesus’ commands to his disciples are what the Old Testament Law was never able to accomplish.

Here, Jesus is telling his disciples that they are to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. They will soon be aware of the hatred people have for Jesus and the hatred they will have for *them*. They will accumulate enemies, simply by following Jesus. And they are called to *love* and pray for them.

Jesus says that they are to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors *so that* they will be children of their Father in heaven. Now, to those of us with Lutheran sensibilities, what Jesus says here sounds like Works’ Righteousness, meaning that what we do gets us into heaven. We Lutherans are *very* suspicious of anything that sounds like Works’ Righteousness, but *Jesus* makes this command, so let’s pay attention.

¹ Eerdman’s, 824.

What does Jesus mean here? Scripture is clear that we are not saved by what we do, but we are taught in the book of James, faith without works is dead (Jas 2:17). Or, as Jesus says later in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:17 – 18, “Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.” In other words, good trees, or true disciples of Jesus, will forgive their enemies.

What does that look like, to forgive our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us? These actions are what marriage counselors might call “turning toward” the other person. Instead of stonewalling the other person, or placing a barrier between yourself and the other person, you turn *toward* the other person in openness. When you turn toward the other person, you open yourself to addressing the pain you experienced in the relationship.

It is much easier to block that which hurts us, and refuse to address the other person. If we block or stonewall, we don’t need to address the possibility of further hurt. We don’t need to address what’s going on inside of us, which *deeply* hurts us. It means that we also don’t need to address the sin within *us* that arose after *we* had been hurt. When we turn toward our enemy in love, we open ourselves to addressing the pain and sin in *our* lives. As Henri Nouwen wrote in *The Wounded Healer*, “The authority of compassion is the possibility for each of us to forgive our brothers and sister, because forgiveness is only real for those who have discovered the weakness of their friends and the sins of their enemies in their own hearts, and are willing to call each human being their sister and brother.”²

² Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 46.

Let me be clear that loving our enemies does *not* mean becoming a doormat and allowing *abuse*. I am *not* advocating that if you are in an abusive relationship that you ought to stay and allow the abuse to continue. That is a very serious matter that cannot be addressed here, but is unfortunately common.

You and I have *all* experienced pains that have seemed impossible to heal. And this is precisely why Jesus calls his disciples to *pray* for their persecutors. On their own and on our own, we are *unable* to love those who have become our enemies. And so we *pray* for those who have hurt us. We pray that God would work in their lives and draw them to Himself. We pray that we would turn toward them and love them. We recognize that this may take *years* until our feelings catch up with the work God is doing in us, but we continue to pray.

You and I need God to forgive us of our lack of love and to assure us that justice is ultimately in His hands. Scripture reminds us in places like Romans 12:19, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” You and I do *not* need to make things right in our lives; God will do that. You and I are called to love and to pray, and the Holy Spirit will continue to work in you and in me to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, loving our enemies, until they become brothers and sisters to us.

What a beautiful thing it will be, when people see Jesus’ Church, and see an incomprehensible love for our enemies and prayer for those who don’t seem to be deserving of it.

A prayer was found in the clothing of a child who had died at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp during WWII. May this also be our prayer: "O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But, do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us: Instead remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering – Our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble. When our persecutors come to be judged by you, let all of these fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness."³ And Lord, give us strength to know ourselves and Your love, so that we may turn to our enemy and love him, love her. Amen

³ From *All the Saints*, Volume III, pg 336.