

Forgiving Our Enemies Is Good for Our Health

Feb. 20, 2022 -- Rev. Bill Chadwick
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Scripture: Luke 6:27-38

We've all heard of the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's gospel. Today's lectionary gospel reading comes from the equivalent in Luke, but in Luke the location is different. In Luke it is called the Sermon on the Plain. That is spelled "P-l-a-i-n," not P-l-a-n-e." This passage is rich and meaty and more complex than it looks on the surface. It could easily be the basis of an 8-part sermon series. I'm going to break it into bite-size pieces and ignore some of them.

"Turn the other cheek" is one of those biblical phrases that has made its way into our contemporary lexicon. At first blush, it appears that Jesus is commanding his followers to be passive Casper Milquetoasts and to let people mistreat them and walk all over them. If someone strikes you on the cheek, you turn the other and say, "Hit me again."

That is a very common *misconception*. Dead wrong. Properly understood in the cultural context of the day, Jesus is actually saying to *stand up* to your *oppressor* and demand to be treated as an equal.

I considered giving you a detailed explanation of this, but I've already done so in my sermon of July 14, 2019. I'm sure you remember every word. If not, it is available in a printed version on the stand on the way out of the Gathering Area and it's posted online on the church website. Friends, it is worth your time to look it up. It's a brilliant exposition, if I say so myself. I can say that because it's all borrowed from Biblical scholar Walter Wink, to whom I gave credit in the sermon.

Fascinating stuff.

What I want to zero in on today is Jesus' command "...love your enemies."

I love being a pastor. For a lot of reasons, not just the big money. One of the favorite things in my career was when my last congregation, Oak Grove Presbyterian in Bloomington, installed an electronic sign out front. They let me compose the messages for the sign, which we changed frequently. Some I made up; some I borrowed. Here are a few of my favorites:

"We are a bunch of sinners and hypocrites... We always have room for one more."

"Lent: Fifty Shades of Purple"

"Give your troubles to God...She's up all night anyway."

"Presbyterians Build Bridges, Not Walls"

"We will treat you like family... Come anyway."

And then this one, which I thought up myself, though it took all the willpower I could muster to put it up in lights: "We Even Welcome Packers Fans." We actually got two new member families because of that message. (I really didn't want more than that.) And I am sure that some of you are Packers fans, being as close to Wisconsin as we are. But I don't want to know.

I detest the Packers. Four weeks ago, when the Packers lost in the playoffs on a last-second field goal I literally jumped off the couch and danced around the living room. I realized that I was happier that the Packers lost than I would have been if the Vikings had won the Super Bowl. It gave me more joy to see the Packers lose.

That, my friends, is a confession of sin, a confession of how small a person I am.

Let me clarify what I mean when I said, "I detest the Packers." I don't detest any of the individual players, not even Aaron Rodgers. I just detest losing to them over and over and over again.

Okay, I am having a little fun with this passage about loving our enemies. But that concept of enemies was no laughing matter for those listening to Jesus in first century Palestine, occupied by the Roman Empire.

Sometimes I ramble. Today I've got a clear outline for those of you taking notes. Starting now.

First thing to note is this: Jesus taught a whole lot of stuff on a whole lot of topics. Almost none of his teaching was original to him. Most of his teachings had been taught by previous rabbis and other great world philosophers, including what we call the Golden Rule, vs. 31: "Do to others what you would have them do to you." Homer and Philo, among others, had already taught that.

But "love your enemies..."? I'm told that this was a new teaching! One of the few unique things he taught. And it's radical! Utterly counter-cultural, then and now. Love our enemies? A new teaching.

Second. It's important to note that Jesus did not command us to *like* our enemies. The Greek word

that Jesus uses here translated as “love” is *agape*. Agapaic love is not about feelings, it’s about actions. To do good to another, whether we feel like it or not.

Third, *why* should we love our enemies? Four reasons: a. Jesus told us to. And he lived it, lived it all the way to the Cross: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

b. Verse 36: “Be merciful, just as (God) is merciful.” We are to love our enemies in imitation of the God who loves us, whether we deserve it or not.

Why we should love our enemies, part c: As Gandhi put it. “An eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind.” For God’s sake, we need to end the cycle of violence. Literally, “for God’s sake.” And our own.

d. I know you have been hurt. Badly, badly hurt. Every one of you. I know this, because as a pastor I have been listening to parishioners’ stories for almost 45 years. So much pain. And I am so, so sorry. If we don’t forgive, but cling to our bitterness, it is as if we swallow poison in hopes the other person will get sick. Forgiveness is good for our health.

A caveat: If you have been abused, I encourage you not to move too quickly to forgiveness, but to seek professional help to join you on a journey toward healthy healing.

Which leads us into main point number four: *How* do we do it? How do we love our enemies? I personally find it very helpful to seek to understand the other person. Those of us of a certain age have learned that everybody has a story. Right? Hurtful actions come out of the person’s own woundedness.

In August of 2020, our daughter Allie drove home alone on a Saturday evening to her apartment in south Minneapolis. It was just getting fully dark as she got out of her car parked on the street. A car pulled up from behind. A young man jumped from the passenger’s side of the car, put a gun in her face and demanded her purse. She immediately handed it to him, put her hands up, and then turned away, so her assailant would understand she was not trying to identify him. The young man jumped back in the car, and they sped off.

Of course, she was very, very shaken. Literally shaking. Yet within the hour, she said, “If they catch this guy, I hope they don’t throw the book at him. I’m sure he’s had a horrible life, and with Covid now, he might very well be hungry and totally desperate.”

I have never been prouder of her. I was not yet at that place of understanding. But she’s a better person than I am. And these are the types of desperate people she deals with as a public defender in Minneapolis. She knows the whole story.

How we love our enemies, part b. Pray for them.

I don’t really have any “enemies.” As far as I know. I used to. But I think that the dozens of young men I beat out for the hand of Kris Jacobson have probably finally let it go. There are some political figures I might put in the “enemy” category, some folks that I dislike even more than the Packers. Rather than simply stew, I choose to pray for them. (I don’t pray for the Packers; I do pray for political figures.) And the temptation is to pray that God would remake them to think like I do. I resist that temptation. Instead, I pray blessing upon them, in whatever way God chooses. I also pray for *healing* for them, because their actions must come from a place of great woundedness. (And again, I think praying for them is good for my health.)

How to love our enemies, part c. Most of us cannot do it on our own power. I can’t. We need the power of Christ’s Spirit. We need the power found through prayer. We need the power found in our Christian community in order to be people of love and forgiveness.

So, let me recap and then offer a couple of stories for inspiration: 1. The concept of loving enemies was a new teaching by Jesus. 2. We don’t have to *like* our enemies; we are to *act* on behalf of their welfare. 3. *Why* should we love our enemies? Because Jesus said to, and in imitation of Jesus and of God. To end the cycle of violence. And for our own health. 4. *How* do we love our enemies? Seek to understand the story of the other person. Seek God’s power to help us.

Two stories:

A few days ago, I read a brief essay in the New York Times. The writer observed, “I...watched (my gay friend) unbutton his coat and wrap it around the shoulders of a drunk who had called him a homophobic slur.”

Second, four years ago on Palm Sunday, about a half an hour before our first service at Oak Grove, a couple of visitors showed up. Two men in their thirties. They didn’t come into the church building. They stood on the busy street outside the church, next

to our rainbow flag, and unfurled large banners decrying the congregation's welcome of LGBTQ folk, and listing scripture passages. They hollered at children coming in from the parking lot, saying that if they kept coming to this church that they would go to hell.

I was busy prepping for the service when this was reported to me. I immediately hurried out to talk with these two young men. I was already wearing my robe, so they knew who I was. I told them my name and asked for theirs. They wouldn't say. I told them that I agreed with them about the seven biblical passages emblazoned on their banners. Those passages describe *behaviors* that absolutely *should* be condemned—men abusing boys, temple prostitution, homosexual rape. All horrible abuses of power.

But, I continued, the Bible nowhere talks about “homosexuality” per se; it talks about behaviors. The Bible never talks about people of same-sex orientation in a loving, monogamous, equal relationship. Well, as you can imagine, they were unconvinced by my five-minute display of brilliant Biblical exegesis. I needed to go lead worship. As I was wrapping up,

I saw out of the corner of my eye a huge shadow approaching, which I immediately realized could only be...Jesus. Well, his actual name was Frank. Frank was a 6'5" 300-pound former Northwestern University football player. He and his wife are *the* most faithful followers of Jesus I have ever witnessed. They make me feel like a total slacker in the faithfulness department. I could go on and on with examples, but let me just give the most obvious. After the birth of their first child, they then adopted special needs children, eight of them, and lavished love upon them for thirty-plus years and now are raising some of their grandchildren, also special needs. Frank and Bev's utter faithfulness to the movement of the Holy Spirit is why the church staff behind the scenes called Frank “Jesus” and his wife we called “Mrs. Jesus.”

As I stopped wasting my breath on arguments, Frank appeared on the scene, smiling broadly, and in his immense hands, he was bringing two cups of coffee and about half a dozen cupcakes, which he gave to the men, as he invited them to come in for worship.

Love your enemies. Amen?