

A sermon preached at Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA on February 24, 2019.
Epiphany 7: Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-12,41-42; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be always acceptable, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.**

Enemies come in all shapes and sizes, and we all have them.

They could be people at work or in your community; perhaps one who gossips about you or ignores you; maybe someone who stole from your business or from you personally; a competitor who doesn't fight fair; a boss who makes your life difficult; a man or woman who abused or injured you; a colleague who turned on you. Enemies are sometimes even those we love: family or friends who mock you for your beliefs or affiliation; a partner who left you; a parent who deserted you; siblings who no longer speak to you.

Yes, enemies come in all shapes and sizes, and we all have them. Enemies aren't just soldiers on the other side of a military style war.

Today we hear the most amazing and challenging section of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. In Verses 27-28 of Luke's Gospel, he says, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Now, that is not a quote from the Old Testament. It might have been the local rabbis' teaching, having interpreted scripture, but it isn't in the Old Testament. Instead, Jesus goes on to say that this is the true character of our God. This is the fulfillment of God's Commandment. Jesus says, 'I know what the world looks like and feels like. But I say to you anyway... "Love your enemies ..."

While I was growing up, my first reaction to an enemy was to fight back, to retaliate, to get my revenge, to hurt them in some way. I wanted to win at almost any cost. If that wasn't possible, I would at least have nothing else to do with them. I confess I was sometimes even prone to gossip to others about the people who hurt me somehow. I hope I have, shall we say, matured somewhat since then.

Because Jesus challenges us, both you and me. If we are to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and we have one enemy or more, we must love them. Winning in this world is not the goal.

Here at Grace Church, we take Jesus' words seriously, believing his words speak Truth. We don't hear some of his harder sayings and think they are outdated, impractical, or maybe even unrealistic. We struggle to understand. We try to see how we can live in his way today – knowing that if we are truly his disciples, we must obey ALL that he commanded us to do. Even this.

So, what does Jesus mean, 'Love your enemies?'

First, let us consider what it doesn't mean. We shouldn't pretend that our enemies are really our friends. When called to love our enemies, we shouldn't

ignore acts of injustice or unrighteousness, or pretend that their consequences aren't valid. Loving our enemy does not mean turning a blind eye or a deaf ear to evil and injustice and pain.

No, the Bible tells us to resist and stand firm against the schemes of the Evil One. Our human existence is riddled with sinful acts, ours and others, yet we are the ones called to combat evil in our world. That's what Jesus did in the courts when he resisted the chief priests who would pervert God's Truth. Somehow, when we do fight for justice, we must tie that in with loving our enemies.

So, what does Jesus mean 'love our enemies?' When Jesus talks, Jesus gets real! He gives us very practical ways about loving our enemies. He knows that it's tricky, and confusing, and challenging. In Verses 27-28, we are to 'do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us.' No, we do not pray peril or disease upon them. It means that we pray as Jesus taught us to pray. Using the prayer our Lord gave us; "Our Father, who art in heaven ..." God, I pray that those who hate me might also come to know you as their God. "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done." I pray that your Kingdom will be revealed to them in this situation, that your righteousness, your holiness, and your mercy will bless those also who curse me. "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." [Ah, there's the rub!] God, I am sinful, imperfect, and broken. Please forgive me for anything I have done, but Lord help me also to forgive my abusers for what they have done, to me or others. Jesus says **PRAY FOR** our enemies.

I don't know about you, but I do love doing good to those I like. A friend of mine likes to say, "It's nice to be nice to the nice." If it's a VTS schoolmate or clergy colleague I'm close to, I might call to help them think through a sermon or how to address a pastoral matter. When I really like people, I give my time and my talents freely to be with them, for them. Well, Jesus says we need to do the same for our enemies. Jesus says **DO GOOD** to our enemies.

Then Jesus tells us, "Bless those who curse you." So instead of receiving an insult and knocking one back at the opposition, when we receive a curse or an insult, we should respond with a blessing or a prayer. Our comeback could be a compliment, our retaliation to rethink, to reframe! Jesus wants us to challenge people to be their best selves by being our own best selves. Jesus says **BLESS** our enemies with God's Love.

You see, Jesus asks us to love our enemies as He has loved us. Love is the secret. St. Paul wrote in Ephesians that we are to be imitators of God and to live a life of love just as Christ loves us. You remember that before he became Paul, Saul persecuted followers of The Way before his transforming moment on that road to Damascus. Saul was an enemy who was changed by Love. We are called

to love our enemies in that same way, the same ‘Way of Love’ we will study throughout Lent.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who certainly knew enemies in his life, preached on this very passage, giving us three reasons that we are to love our enemies. First, he said, ‘Returning hate for hate only multiplies hate’... “adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.” “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Second, Dr. King added that hate is self-destructive, scarring our souls like “an unchecked cancer” which ‘corrodes and destroys.’ Finally, he said ‘Loving our enemy is the only force capable of transforming that enemy into a friend.’ These are three good reasons, and this is a remarkable statement, especially when put into context. Dr. King was both exhorting and comforting his followers, knowing the violence they would face from enemies who wielded billy clubs, unleashed vicious dogs, and used water cannons to beat them down and drive them back.

Jesus further expands this thought. In verse 31, Jesus says, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” He explains, you are children of God – do as God does, and Love as God loves. Be imitators of your Father in heaven. God loves us all, undeserving as we are - and we should do likewise. In other words, don’t just do good in the expectation of receiving the same treatment. Just DO GOOD.

You know as well as I do that it is easy to love the lovable. It is “nice to be nice to the nice.” But doing only this is not God’s kind of love. God’s way is not our way. God’s thoughts are higher, broader, and different.

In his book, “*Loving Our Enemies*,” Jim Forest, an American writer, Orthodox Christian lay theologian, educator, and peace activist, remembered a conversation from 1987. Mikhail Gorbachev in his second year as the Soviet head of state had ended religious persecution. Forest asked a Russian Orthodox priest, “Aren’t you surprised?” “Not at all,” he said. “All believers have been praying for this every day of our lives. We knew God would answer our prayer, only we did not know when. I am only surprised that our prayer has been answered while I am still alive.” “Still,” Forest said, “surely you must hate those who caused so much suffering and who killed so many.” The priest replied, “Why should I? How will they find the way to belief unless we love them? And if I refuse to love them, I too am not a believer.”

Dear Friends, we are called to be beacons of God’s Love to conquer the world. This love is radical Love. Our world can feel very broken today. We hear of so much division. Us versus them. Terror in the unknown. Always assume the worst. How do we fight this? With Love. We push back the darkness of this world with the love of God, invoking the name of Jesus Christ.

Like everything else, this begins here at home, within the Body of Christ known as the Church. In this church. Grace Church. There may be enemies even here. My friends, if that is the case, there is no doubt what you are called to do. Love them. Seek through love to resolve conflict quickly and completely; to reconcile graciously. Be authentic and honest with how we feel. Refuse to gossip and instead say to others how we have been hurt. Love abundantly even those who hurt you. As a parish church, we are called to shine our love into this community of Alexandria and beyond.

When we cannot bring ourselves to do good to those enemies, we could end up like the trucks filled with U.S. aid stuck at the Venezuelan border – good intentions locked in a battle of wills. If we do not want to bless our enemies who curse us, we perpetuate the cycle of hate and fear disturbing our very way of life. If we do not love our enemies, we may find ourselves stockpiling weapons and searching how to effect mass destruction because, well, maybe because we have lost faith in the power of love, giving up on our own role in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

Keep loving and praying, my friends. Pray for yourself. Pray for others. Pray for your enemies. There is love and hope in that singular action of prayer. When you pray for the world -- the whole world -- we all win.

If you are listening to this and are squirming, know that I am right there with you. I first look at my own heart ... and I sigh. I fear it's too hard! I'm know my heart at times is too callous, too scarred, and too bitter. But here's where Christ comes in, not only as our example, but also as our means through which we can love ALL others.

We can love our enemies because we ourselves have experienced that unmerited, sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, knowing just how undeserving we really are. We can love our enemies when we lay down our hurts, hates, bitterness, and fear at the foot of the Cross and seek Christ's healing. We can love our enemies when we see through Christ's eyes how he sees our enemies ... as beloved children of God. Remember who is God and who we are not. Leave those feelings of seeking human justice behind, and judge not. Let Jesus be the perfect judge of all.

Today, let's all ask ourselves: Who are our enemies? Do we carry grudges? Are we saddled with bitterness? Do we feel justified in not loving someone? Wherever they are, whoever they are, we are called, No, we are **COMMANDED**, to love them. Jesus says, "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." This perfect love is without discrimination, open to all people, friends and enemies. Love them. Just do it.