

Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Grace to you and peace from Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Ah, but there's nothing like a good *enemy*, is there? A really *good enemy* (and we've all had them, some maybe for longer periods of time than others), but a really *good enemy* can give structure to your day, direction to your life... a really *good enemy* can provide comfort as warm as any blanket on a cold, lonely day; nourishment even, as delicious as any pie.

In short, a *good enemy* offers a *way of life*, don't they?

But leave it to Jesus to offer a different way. But let's not sugar-coat it, if we don't have to. The way of Jesus leaves you hungry, uncomfortable, structure-less and direction-less, doesn't it? Let's be honest, this "loving-enemies" stuff, it's more like dying than living, isn't it?

"Always forgive your enemies;" Oscar Wilde is quoted as saying, "nothing annoys them so much." "Never interrupt your enemy," said Napoleon "when he is making a mistake." "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies," said G.K. Chesterton, "probably because generally they are the same people."

"It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends, said Mahatma Gandhi. "But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion. The other is mere business."¹ Of course, *no one said it would be easy*, as the saying goes.

"You have [also] heard it was said," Jesus continues his long list of sayings in the Sermon on the Mount. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" which, by the way, wasn't such a bad law for limiting retaliation in a tribal society where *for an eye*, it could easily be the whole head of your enemy's cousin... or *for a tooth*, it could well mean the very life of your enemy's firstborn). Still Jesus doesn't seem to want to settle for "pretty-good" laws that protect our neighbor from us (as Bishop Zellmer reminded us last week).

¹ All four quotes taken from: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/enemies>

“Is that going to get us anywhere?” asks Jesus in *The Message* translation of our reading today. “Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.”

It does not seem to me that Jesus is asking us to be doormats or weaklings. If anything Jesus seems to be asking us to be open doors to a new way of being, Jesus seems to be calling us to summon an inner strength most of us are doubtful we have within us. “But you do,” Jesus says.

Because what if it’s not about your enemy, as much as it is about you and me and the way we’ve learned to survive, not really live, just survive...

It’s true, having an enemy can provide a sense of comfort, but it’s little more than the kind of shelter you get from prison walls, isn’t it? It’s true, the hatred of an enemy can certainly nourish you – feed a certain hunger, but it’s more like a feeding tube or a bitter pill that you keep swallowing *just to barely stay alive*, isn’t it?

It’s true, hating an enemy can certainly give structure to your day, even direction to your life, but hatred is a foundation which crumbles with any kind of adversity and bitterness is a never-ending rat-maze where each turn looks the same as the last. It’s not really living, is it?

Maybe Jesus’ difficult words, are more about you and what’s at stake for your life, than what’s at stake for your enemy.

I remember it was almost in passing that I heard words of wisdom from a fellow pastor a few years ago. The suggestion was this: that often the thing that bothers you the most about that person you just hate... often that thing is *the very thing* you’re having the hardest time reconciling within yourself, which is another way of saying “forgiving yourself.” Maybe loving your enemy is as much about loving yourself, and in this way sometimes you really are your own worst enemy.

Then again, maybe it is about more than just you, maybe it’s about community, the church, the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God – whatever you want to call it.

One of the things that defines a “tribal society” is that there are very well-defined boundaries and always, boundaries are a fantastic way of providing *identity*. Just not the kind of identity that Jesus seems to be after.

There’s a widely quoted Bedouin saying that illustrates the way boundaries provide identity in a tribal society. The saying goes (at least, according to Wikipedia): “I against my brother, my brother and I against my cousins, then my cousins and I against strangers.”

We do like to think that we live in a “developed,” a “less tribal” society, a democracy with a rule of law, and don’t get me wrong there are plenty of wonderful things to celebrate where and how we live. But before we pat ourselves on the back too quickly, we might ask – honestly how do we measure up against this way of living that Jesus offers.

When resources are limited, when conflict arises, when stress passes that tolerable level... do we too circle the wagons, clarify our identity, define ourselves by ‘who we are not,’ starting with a little blame, which of course, so easily festers into hatred and *voila!* You have yourself an enemy.

But let me warn you, the other option – the other way that Jesus puts before you today – there’s nothing easy about it. This way of Jesus, not only can leave you hungry and uncomfortable, but if you turn the other cheek it can leave you stinging with shame; if you give up your cloak as well as your coat, it will leave you naked and vulnerable; if you go the second mile in someone else’s shoes, don’t be surprised when your feet ache with blisters.

But brothers and sisters, there is also life, you might even call it *abundant life*, which is revealed through this way of living. You might be left shelter-less, but you’re no longer imprisoned in your own hatred. You might be hungry, but you’re no longer swallowing the bitter pill of your own resentment (that bitter pill of poison you’ve been swallowing so long in the hopes that it would finally kill your enemy). You might feel direction-less, but you will have this wandering, homeless teacher named Jesus to lead you.

I probably should tell you a grand story of loving one’s enemies now about Martin Luther King, Jr. or Nelson Mandela. At the very least, I could offer you another quote from Mahatma Ghandi or even sing you a song in memory of Pete Seeger who died just a few weeks ago... and certainly all of these folks are great inheritors of the precious way of life that Jesus offers in our Gospel Reading for today.

But instead, a much less grand, but even more impossible story... It's a story about Matt (or Matthew) and a co-worker of his by the name of Ryan.²

Let's put it simply – Matt hated Ryan; and for good reason. According to Matt at least, Ryan was first and foremost, “terribly inauthentic...unable to be genuine toward others.” Second, Ryan was “headstrong” ignoring even disregarding “his more experienced co-workers and his bosses.” And thirdly, Ryan had the “intimidating physique of an Olympic body builder.” “...even more buff than me” Matt said with more than a little disdain.

Well, one day after a “grueling shift” Matt “begrudgingly accepted” an offer from Ryan to buy him a beer, “figuring that, at the very least, [he'd] gain a beer out of the deal.” But after a fair amount of “nauseating small talk” Matt was beginning to doubt that the beer was worth it and found himself saying without even thinking, “So, what's your story?” And this, was Ryan's story, at least as heard by Matt:

While just 24 years old at the time, Ryan had lived in 19 different states as a kid... [*listen to audio version for full version*]

And as Matt sat in awe at all that Ryan had shared, Ryan “got up, paid for [the] beers, and said, ‘thanks for listening Matthew. This turned out to be an okay birthday after all.’”

Thanks be to God, that more often than not, enemies are transformed into friends in spite of us and our best efforts. But make no mistake, it is the very power of the Holy Spirit, through the love and wisdom of Jesus Christ, breaking down the identities we've built with hatred and resentment; creating something new... that gives life. Real life.

May you find the freedom to live the love, which is in Christ Jesus. Free from enemies, free from yourself, free from hatred, free to love. Amen.

² From “The Becoming of Belonging” by Matthew J. Olson (June 18, 2013, revised August 15, 2013). Used with permission.