

3-1-20 SERMON CCI Matthew 5: 43- 48 Kingdom Citizens: Loving Neighbors AND Enemies

Anyone here ever face a real enemy? Perhaps if you were in the military during war? I can only count one person in my life as a real enemy. Oh, I've had people who opposed me but we weren't enemies; we just didn't agree. But when I was a professor of nursing in Dubuque, Iowa, our department chair was a difficult woman. She could be mean-spirited, treated her favorite professors preferentially over others, and her use of department funds was questionable. But worst, she would pick on students she didn't like, and reacted poorly to legitimate student concerns. I still remember her coming into my classroom as I was about to pass out an exam and began yelling at the students for something she was irritated about. There came a time when 4 of us professors decided to bring our concerns to the Dean. The Dean took our concerns seriously and during the summer, demoted her from being Department chair. But she could remain as a professor because she was tenured. She was livid and retaliated against those she suspected went to the Dean, including me. She saw me as her enemy. In today's scripture reading Jesus talked about how we are to treat enemies.

This is Jesus' last time to say, "You have heard it said... but I tell you" in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. *You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy."* The beginning of this phrase is a quote from ([Lev. 19:18](#)) which says *"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."* It's pretty clear about loving your neighbor within your own people.

There is nothing in the law, however, that said to hate their enemies. But hating enemies **was** a common understanding of the time. One of the mottos of the Pharisees was "If a Jew sees that a Gentile has fallen into the sea, let him by no means lift him out. Of course it is written, 'Do not rise up against your neighbor's life,' but this man is not your neighbor." Once you don't see people who are different from you as neighbors deserving to be loved, it's only a short slide to hating them.

We understand this, don't we? Those who are close to us, who are like us, those who share our experiences, values, and beliefs- they are the ones we love. But those who are different or strange—that's different. It's easy to distrust them, to dislike them, to not care about their needs as much, to exclude them from our gatherings and blessings, to not worry if they are being discriminated against, to treat them as less than us.

I see this division into us and them in our nation. It's difficult to talk with people in different political parties without an argument breaking out. Democrats against Republicans and Republicans against Democrats. Calling names, attacking the other as an enemy. Race is another area. I was involved in a discussion about the confederate flag and was told, "You're nothing but a white nigger!" Hate crimes toward churches, mosques, and synagogues, people of different sexual orientation, people from other countries. To see people as enemy rather than neighbor.

Jesus calls his followers to love our neighbors AND our enemies. It's important to recognize that Jesus was not addressing how soldiers were to treat the enemies they faced on the battlefield. He was not telling soldiers to lay down their swords and hug the enemies out to kill them. Jesus was speaking to his followers about how to treat personal enemies, how to treat those who personally mistreat us or oppose us. And his answer was to love them. To pray for those who persecute us. ⁴⁶ *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?* ⁴⁷ *And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that.* Once again, Jesus calls us to a higher standard than the lowest common denominator. The lowest common denominator in his day were the tax collectors and pagans. Only loving and welcoming those who are like us is no better than them! *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*

So what does it mean to love our enemies? These days love often gets defined as an emotion, a warm fuzzy feeling of affection. But the love Jesus speaks of is not a feeling; the word translated love is agape, an unconditional love that does not need the love to be returned for it to exist and take loving action. Agape love is a decision, often a decision to do something opposite of what we feel like doing.

For example, when your 5 year old comes into your room at 3 o'clock in the morning and says, "Mommy, I threw up." What do you do? You get out of bed, clean him up, change his sheets, and soothe him back to sleep. Is that what you FEEL like doing? But you do it because you love him.

It's natural to love our own child this way. It's not natural to love our enemy, yet Jesus calls us to "love" our enemy in the same way. A sacrificial kind of love. Agape love is the kind of love God has for us, love that sees us as we really are and loves us anyway, and lovingly acts on our behalf.

The Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 about love are heard in the context of loving people who we **want** to love- like at weddings. But they weren't written for brides and grooms; they were written about loving anyone. Today, I'd like us to consider how these words apply to loving our enemies. So pick someone you struggle with: a political opponent, , someone whose values are antithetical to yours, or someone who's done you wrong. Think about that person and listen to how Jesus would have you treat them.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. [5] It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. [6] Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. [7] It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. [8] Love never fails.

Let's pause and let this sink in. Is this how we treat people who make our lives harder, who stand for something we stand against, who disagree with us, sometimes with harsh words and actions? How about the person who irritates us on the phone or in a store? Do we get easily angered? Do we hold onto a record of wrongs people have done?

I don't know about you, but I am challenged by loving enemies the way Paul describes. I've heard it all my life that we are to love the sinner but hate the sin. But what really happens is we treat the sinner no better than we treat the sin. Jesus is calling us to a higher standard of behavior than what comes natural to us. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

So why should we do something so unnatural as loving our enemies? Some people say loving your enemies can turn them into friends. That evil unresisted will burn itself out. Or that God will have vengeance sooner or later. Or because hatred and negativity is bad for our health. Or because hating our enemies gives them power over us. Or because loving our enemies proves who is the better person.

But Jesus doesn't offer any of these reasons. He only gave us one. Jesus said to love our enemies, "so you can be children of your Father in heaven." We are to love our enemies because when we do we live out the character of God, our Father. We act like Daddy. And how does God love? God provides the sunshine and the rain for all people, both the good and the evil. God provides for all people because his love includes all people, even those who oppose him or don't care if God exists. God loves by grace. In the same way, we are to love all people, even our enemies. And we are to pray for those who treat us horribly, to lift them up to our Father in prayer, just as we lift those we deeply love. Not pray **against** them, "God, please punish them for how they treat me." But pray **for** them. Jesus says,

“Be perfect, which doesn’t mean blameless or sinless; the word means be mature by loving as God loves.” In other words, “Grow up!”

Friends, what Jesus is saying here cannot be done on our own strength. Loving our enemies and praying for those who mistreat us is hard, it’s unnatural. We need God’s Spirit to change us inside to even **want** to love an enemy. To give us a love that is big enough to include those who want to harm us. We won’t succeed every time, and will need to ask God’s forgiveness for representing his love poorly. I wish I could tell you that I was perfect in loving my boss in the nursing department according to Paul’s description in I Corinthians 13. There were no warm feelings between us, but agape love is not a feeling. It’s loving action regardless of feelings. And with the Spirit’s daily help, I ended my time there without regret for my behavior. Let us love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. It’s how God’s children live.

This is the Lord’s Table, it’s a table for people who hear Jesus’ words and want to live them even when they are hard. This table reminds us that Jesus lived what we heard today- he loved his enemies even from the cross his enemies nailed him to. And he calls us to follow in his footsteps.

Today, I invite us to do something different as we share communion. On the screen are words I invite you to say to one another as you pass the tray. “This is the Christ’s body broken for you.” “This is Christ’s blood shed for you.” There is power in hearing the words spoken to us personally. So let’s practice saying the words.

