

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Accepting the Apology You Never Got

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. – Luke 6:27-36

The traditional setting of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew's version of the passage from Luke we just heard) is on the northwest shore of Lake Tiberias, which the Romans renamed the Sea of Galilee, to make it sound more impressive. It is a beautiful site, with a modern church, manicured grounds, palm trees and flowers. It is a peaceful place, and of all the places in Israel that I visited when I travelled there in 2006, that was the one where I most moved spiritually. And that was because so many of the traditional sites bear such signs of conflict, conflict between Christians and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, conflict between Orthodox and Catholics, conflict over land and doctrine and politics and history. But of all the hard things that Jesus said, of all the radical challenges that continue to make us cringe today, there is none more challenging, more seemingly impossible, none that more of his followers manage to avoid and obfuscate and find ways to get around, none also more beautiful and life-giving than the teaching to love our enemies.

Our guide in Israel was a Palestinian Christian named Shamir. Shamir was a Christian, a Palestinian, and an Israeli citizen, so he was enmeshed in the history and politics and tensions of that most historically storied and politically divided and religiously tense land. Shamir was a victim of victims. His Palestinian people were victims of the creation of the State of Israel, a state itself founded by victims of the Holocaust. It is one of the great ironies of history that the victims of the holocaust made victims of the Palestinians and continue to make victims of the Palestinians. And it is one of the great ironies of history that many of the Palestinian victims of Israel are quite prepared to make victims of Jewish Israelis. Victims of victims of victims, a spiral of violence and victimization that shows few signs of slowing.

“An eye for an eye,” Ghandi said, “will make the whole world blind.” There is no place on earth where that statement has such evidence than the ancient land of the Bible. Well, actually I wish that were true. There are actually many places, too many places, which provide ample evidence to support that statement.

Another one is the former Yugoslavia, where Therese and I visited a few years after our visit to Israel and Palestine. Our guide there was a Croatian woman. When I asked her, twenty years after the war, whether there had been any healing between Serbs and Croatia, her reply was chilling: “O they have always hated us, and we have always hated them.” There will be

another war here, one day, I thought. An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind. There are lots of places where the truth of that statement is hard to ignore.

But Jesus offers a way of out of conflict: “love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.” It is the most challenging, most beautiful and most life-giving of the many challenging, beautiful and life-giving things Jesus said.

But how do you do it in reality? Because the abstract enemy is easier to love than the real ones, and the real ones are always concrete and the relationship is always complicated:

- When your enemy is your own alcoholic father or your own abusive mother, how do you love them?
- When your enemy is your own spouse who has violated your trust and betrayed the marriage vows, how do you love them?
- When the enemy is the disappointing child, or the obnoxious neighbour, how do you love them?
- When the enemy is the business partner, or political opponent, or competitor for the promotion, or someone who you disagree with about fundamental moral questions, how do you love them?
- When the enemy is the soldier who killed your son and raped your daughter, how do you love them?

Jesus offers a few hints:

First, pray for them. Don't pray about them, but pray for them. Praying about someone isn't the same as praying for them. We can pray about someone without wishing them well. I can pray about my enemy without ever praying for their well-being, without praying genuinely and honestly that they will be blessed. But when we pray for a person, we have to consciously let go of anger and bitterness and we have to genuinely hope that person will experience the blessing of God. Praying for someone requires that we shift the way we think about them in such a way that we no longer think of them as the enemy to be hated. Praying for someone requires the shift that is the first stage of love.

The second hint that Jesus offers is that when we pray for our enemies, we are connected to the grace-full love of God, who sends sunshine and rain on all of us, friends and enemies, good and bad, just and unjust. And in the eyes of the one who is Creator of us all, the difference between the just and the unjust, the good and the bad, may be less obvious than it is to us. In the end, loving our enemy is not a human possibility, but a miracle made possible by transcending our differences and recognizing that we are all God's children. Our enemy is more like us than we want to admit. The enemy eats and sleeps, loves his children, cares for her parents, makes mistakes, is both generous and callous, both forgives and holds grudges,

just like we do. And to God, my enemy may seem an awful lot more like me than I would care to admit.

Extrapolating from Jesus' teaching, I think of eight steps in forgiveness, which focus on the emotional and spiritual work that it takes to move from a spirit of anger and bitterness to a spirit of love.

1. The first step is simply to recognize that you have come to see a person as an enemy and being honest about your feelings of betrayal, anger and bitterness.
2. Second, remind yourself that you have a choice about how to respond, whether to perpetuate the antagonism or to relinquish it.
3. Third, pray for the strength to love your enemy. At this point you are praying for yourself rather than the other. You may not be able to love them yet, but you make an important step when you ask for help in doing so, and recognizing that it is difficult. Sometimes it can take considerable time before we can even think of a person without anger and bitterness. Ask for help in letting go of those feelings.
4. Fourth, honestly review the relationship you have with your enemy. It may be that you have been badly hurt by your enemy and that your sense of injustice is a legitimate one. It may also be that you have hurt the other and he or she has a grievance against you. Make an honest effort to see the relationship from the other's point of view.
5. Fifth, pray for the enemy. At first you may find your prayers contaminated by thoughts of revenge, but persist. Pray for the enemy's health, finances, friendships, relationships, for their general well-being. When you are able to pray for your enemy without malice, you have done the hardest part of learning to love them.
6. Sixth, let go of any need for the person to love you back. Do not expect that the relationship will improve immediately. You may never get the apology you might think you deserve. Accept the enemy's attitude toward you the way it is and resolve to act in a loving way regardless of what the other does or does not do.
7. Seventh, act in a way that benefits the enemy and doesn't benefit you. Love that is not put into action is a dream of love, not love itself. Love has to be lived. Love is not naive, however, so you shouldn't expose yourself to the potential for violence or abuse. Take small, concrete steps that express the different attitude you are taking to the relationship.
8. Finally, if the enemy hurts you again, you may need to go through this process again, and again, acknowledging your feelings, choosing to love, praying for strength, honestly reviewing the relationship, praying for your enemy, letting go of expectations, and acting out of love.

Elizabeth Lesser delivered a TED talk called "Take the Other to Lunch," in which she laments the ways in which we dehumanize and demonize people who disagree with us, and suggests that taking someone you disagree with to lunch is actually a pretty good strategy for breaking through the polarization and negative stereotypes that are so common in modern life. Take your enemy to lunch, she suggests, but with an agreed-on goal that you are going to

take the opportunity to really get to know each other, not just argue about the issues that divide you. She suggests agreeing in advance on some ground rules (don't persuade, for example, don't defend or interrupt, be curious, be conversational, be real, listen.) and focus on really getting to know what the other is really about. and talk about three topics:

- Share some of your life experiences;
- What issues deeply concern you?
- What have you always wanted to ask someone from the "other side"?

Lesser is an activist from the Left of the American political spectrum, so she took a right wing activist to lunch. After they had established some trust, they got around to the topic of what they would like to ask each other, and Lesser asked her lunch mate why Conservatives tells such outrageous lies about Liberals. Her lunch mate was astonished and wondered what lies were being referred to. Lesser offered as examples the accusation that liberals are elitist, morally corrupt, terrorist lovers. And then her lunch mate replied that she also felt attacked by the liberal accusations that conservatives are brainless, gun-toting, racists. This moment of epiphany led the two women to make a mutual commitment, that they would challenge such falsehoods, exaggerations and stereotypes when they had the opportunity.

They didn't resolve all their differences, of course; that wasn't the point. But they did come away from the lunch with a deeper respect for people on the other side of the political divide. They had moved beyond seeing each other as enemies and began the slow difficult journey toward

The Persian poet Rumi put it this way:

Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing,
there is a field.
I will meet you there.

It is hard to love our enemies, but we have a good example in Jesus, who modeled it for us, when he asked for forgiveness for those who crucified him.

In the end there is only one thing harder than loving our enemies, and that is hating them, because just as it takes only one muscle to smile and dozens to frown, in the long run it is far less damaging and takes much less energy to love than to hate. Amen.