



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Enemies

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1 John 2:29-3:3  
Matthew 5:43-48

There was a television show on when I was in college that I absolutely loved called *The West Wing*. And as we all know, when you've spent a whole week at Vacation Bible School, when you come home from the church you binge watch *The West Wing*. There was an episode on that had a line in it that caught my ear. The President is sabotaged with an amendment on a law he wants badly to have passed, so he tasks his staff with finding a way to get the amendment off the bill. They spend the entire episode working to find a solution to this problem, and eventually at the end they get what the President wants, a clean bill. The President is quite pleased, and walks out of the Oval Office with a smile on his face. But before he leaves, one of his staff stops him and says "Sir, we talk about enemies more than we used to."

What struck me about that line is how much it could be a stand in for our culture at large today. We talk about enemies more than we used to. The move in our culture seems to be to identify even the slightest difference in someone, label them as the "other," and then assume the worst about them. And, lately it seems this has little to do with policy, or ideology, or theology.

For example, I heard a story a few weeks ago from a preacher who had given a sermon, and when he finished he got two letters from members of his congregation. The first letter said "Sorry preacher, but the sermon you gave this week was just far too liberal for me, and I'll be leaving the congregation." And then the second letter said "Sorry preacher, but the sermon

you gave this week was just far too conservative for me, and I'll be leaving the congregation." The same sermon can illicit those two reactions from folks who are on high and ready to note the differences that make us enemies. It's like we're all looking for catchphrases and tripwires, whatever might make someone else an enemy.

This is not a new idea. Jesus knew that in his time, people were saying love your neighbor and hate your enemy. As it turns out, only half of that sentence is actually in scripture. Turn all the pages you want, but you won't find a command to hate your enemy. Truthfully, we seem to live by that ideal. We love those who are in our tribe, our clan, our belief system, and we make enemies out of everyone else. We love our neighbors, and hate our enemies.

Now Jesus has said some pretty unreasonable things. Eat my body, drink my blood. The last will be first, and the first last. Sure Peter, take a step out of the boat and onto the water. But this command to love our enemies may be the most outrageous thing Jesus has ever said. The source of all knowledge in the universe, Google, defines an enemy as "a person who is actively opposed or hostile to someone or something." If I love someone, can they actually remain my enemy? Perhaps that was Jesus' point.

According to Jesus, this outpouring of love is kind of a family trait. A few years ago Cassandra gave Ed and I each a Christmas ornament that had what we should consider our family motto, written in Latin. Mine seemed pretty rad when I first read it. "Movere ad metam, et sibi victoriam." That sounds like something you can shout as you rush into battle. But it sounds way less impressive

when it's translated into English. "Move the goal posts, and claim victory."

But I think for Jesus, it would appear that the family of God's motto is "Lovers of the enemy." The love we have in Christ would be so great, that we would love even those we would consider our enemies.

At this point in the teaching Jesus does something rather sneaky. After instructing us to love our enemies, Jesus brings up a couple of people groups. Don't the tax collectors do that? Are not the pagans in that boat? Jesus intentionally brings up some of the enemies of the people he's teaching right then and there, as if to ask if they really love all their enemies.

For me, there are in the world Christian groups who I don't think do as good a job of loving everyone as they ought to. There are those with whom I disagree. And so what I tend to do is label them as other, and push them to the side. In my attempt to love my enemies, I make enemies out of those who don't love enough. It's as if Jesus is asking those of us who would imagine that we have no enemies if we're sure. Are we really free of enemies? To be sure, we have global terror threats. Our political culture has never been so divided. And I would even bet that there are some people who just annoy the snot out of us. Jesus is calling you and I to love each and every one of these people just the same.

And then to wrap up the passage, Jesus ices the unreasonable cake he's assembled by commanding us to be perfect. What's funny is that some people I know use this last verse as an escape hatch for the whole enterprise of loving your enemies. "I'll never *actually* be

perfect, so oh well...” But perhaps perfection is the wrong word. It turns out that in Greek the word here could be just as easily translated complete, or wholeness. Perhaps we could ask it this way: When we carry hatred for our enemies, are we not losing a piece of ourselves? Are we not incomplete? When we carry an enemy, aren't we giving them a piece of ourselves, or passion, our attention, our focus? Wouldn't it be better if we were truly complete people? Anne Lamott says to refuse to forgive our enemies is to eat rat poison and wait for the other person to die. Wouldn't it be better to be our complete selves, to let go of our enemies?

Which brings us to the question of how. How do we love our enemies? Are we to have the world's largest bake sale? Perhaps gather everyone around the fire and sing Kumbaya? These may sound silly, but the truth is that this question can be another escape hatch for Jesus' commandment to love. If we don't know how to lace up and love everyone, maybe it will be easier to just live into our normal life, enemies and all.

The Bible actually offers us a fairly clear way to love everyone, including our enemies. We love each other best when we see the humanity in others. John reminds us in his letter what an incredible act of love it is to recognize each other as children of God. Instead of labeling someone as the “other,” what recognizing another human as a child of God does is label them as one of us. This isn't to say that we want others to be the exact same as us, but that they will be included in our family.

I spend more time than is probably recommended or healthy on Facebook, and I have to say that Facebook

was a pretty ugly place to live during the last election cycle. It got so bad that I eventually had to take a break and walk away from it for a while. It had nothing to do with policy or ideology, though I really wish it would have. We somehow forgot that the candidates running for office were actual people. And, to make matters worse, at some point in the campaign this hatred was pointed not just at the candidates, but at those who supported them. We forgot that they are human, just like us.

Perhaps in these situations, when we find ourselves in the presence of our enemies, we would do well to ask ourselves what makes them human? What are their wants and desires? Where do they carry the wounds of their past? How have we ourselves wounded them? In what ways are they just like us?

When we answer these questions, we are then led by Jesus to hold these former enemies in our prayers. I love the prayer time we share at the Bridge. When we started ten years ago, asking everyone for their joys and concerns was met with the same reaction as if we had been asking who wants a free root canal. After a little while, some folks would offer up a celebration of quick praise for a birthday, or anniversaries, and graduations. But now, we're at a point where folks at the Bridge will tearfully open up about the dark places in their lives. I've also seen them every bit as tearfully celebrate deep and meaningful evidence of God in their lives. I think we've gotten to that place because as a community we've learned to trust each other with our prayers. We believe people will actually go home and pray for each other. We believe that folks will faithfully hold each other.



I wonder if we could keep our enemies if we prayed for them like that. I wonder if we would be able to hold on to our anger if we were praying for their pain? I wonder if we would be able to keep them at an arm's length, labeled as the other, if we remembered them in the same prayer time as our families? I wonder if we would be able to look forward to their failures if we found ourselves celebrating their joys?

This is one area among many where I think the church is ripe to deal with the issues facing our culture. In just a few moments, we gather around this table to receive the Lord's Supper. It's a glorious feast, one that is open and available to all! There is room enough for every single soul at this table. But at the same time, there is no room for us to carry our enemies. There is no room for our labels. There is no room for our dehumanizing others. There is no room for anger. There is no room for bitterness. There is no room for hatred. There is no room for these things around this table because the grace, love, and forgiveness of Jesus Christ is too much for them.

We gather around the table to celebrate the forgiveness offered to us by the same Jesus who when nailed to the cross whispered over his enemies "Forgive them..."

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.



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