

“We refuse to be enemies”

Luke 6: 27-38

9/1/24 FCC

We probably should spend more than an hour of our week reflecting on the meaning and importance of this particular bible passage. In fact, there are those who center this passage in their life and work. We will hear and learn from some of them as we spend some time together this morning.

First, a few rambling thoughts...

Something that I'm aware of in my day to day, everyday life, is that so much pain and harm is caused by ... how to describe it...not the enemy out there, not the villainous “other”, but the people close to us, those in our workplaces, in our families, in friendships.

Whether it's a colleague at work who's sort of annoying, or it's somebody close to us who disappoints us or hurts our feelings, or someone in our local community, the gadfly for example, who becomes our villain — there are people and relationships that we can become consumed by. And the anger, and our bad feelings have a way of becoming that habit we can have of going over someone's faults again and again and again. I'm sure I'm not the only one with this particular habit. We give over so much of our energy to someone else in this negative or destructive way.

Much as we don't want to give so much of our life's energy to someone else's actions or problems we do. Whether it's a minor annoyance or a grave injustice, there's a way in which we want to be whole. And we want that energy we spend on being hurt and angry to return to us, and to be able to go on in a more creative, generative way.

And so the psychology of “love your enemies” does not just mean, come and trample on me...go ahead and treat me badly, or abuse me, I will just roll over and take it, or ignore your behavior. But rather, this is a response of strength...you do not have that kind of power over me.

And as we continue as a society to grapple with racism and a reckoning with our past and present, we white folks are recognizing that it is also the case, that the enemy is not always out there, but the enemy is within...it can be me and you and us. When people are vulnerable, and others have power, whether it's a destructive power like white supremacy, or our position of privilege or power in a relationship, or organization,

we can do incredible damage and harm to others by what we say and do, even and often when we are not aware.

The scholar [Walter Wink](#), in his book *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, interprets this passage in Luke as a subversion of the power structures of the time. Jesus is addressing an audience of people who are primarily poor and marginalized. At the time, says Wink, striking a person with the back of a hand was a means of asserting authority and dominance. If the persecuted or vulnerable person "turned the other cheek," the discipliner was faced with a dilemma: The left hand was used for unclean purposes, so a back-hand strike on the opposite cheek would not be performed. An alternative would be a slap with the open hand as a challenge or to punch the person, but this was seen as a statement of equality. Thus, by turning the other cheek, the vulnerable person was saying "I'm not inferior to you. I'm a human being. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I'm a child of God. I won't take it anymore."

Jesus' second example in the passage has to do with debt. Deuteronomy 24 provided that a creditor could take as collateral for a loan a poor person's long outer robe but it had to be returned each evening so that that person would have something in which to sleep. It is to this situation that Jesus speaks. His hearers share a rankling hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands, their goods, and finally even their outer garments.

Why then does Jesus counsel them to give up their undergarments as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of a local court stark naked. They didn't have underwear as we do today. There were two items of clothing: the outer and the inner garments. But nakedness was taboo in Judaism and shame fell less on the naked party rather than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness. By stripping, the debtor has then brought shame on the creditor. There stands the creditor covered in shame. The poor debtor's outer garment in one hand, the inner garment in the other. The tables have suddenly been turned on the creditor.

To an oppressed people, Jesus' call is to neither submission nor violent reprisal. Neither flight nor fight. Rather it is a third way, a way of creative non-violence. A way that can secure human dignity and begin to change the power equation. Jesus is not advocating non-violence merely as a technique for outwitting the enemy. But as a just

means of opposing the enemy in a way that holds open the possibility of the enemy's becoming just also. This is necessary since we will usually have to live with our opponents after the conflict is over.

This forms the revolutionary principle that Jesus articulates as the basis for our inter-relationships. Jesus rejects both passivity and violence. He articulates out of the history of his own people's struggles, a way by which the oppressor can be resisted without being emulated. And the enemy neutralized without being destroyed. Those who live by Jesus' words point us to ways of confronting conflict, and with potential for personal and social transformation. Whether through the work of leaders like MLK, and movements like the Civil Rights movement, or in the individual and local work of restorative justice...we see the power of love to drive out hate, and for peace to be forged.

On a rock that stands at the entrance to the Tent of Nations just outside Bethlehem in the West Bank are painted the following words in Arabic, English, and German: WE REFUSE TO BE ENEMIES. The Tent of Nations is the story of the Nassar Family, and how they center this axiom in their life and work. As Daoud Nassar says "When we act in a different way, we force the other to see us as human beings".

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPVARk1V_hA

Whether they are enemies near, or far, or even when the enemy is within, God calls us to love our enemies. When the way forward seems impossible, like today in the Middle East as people struggle for the right to self-determination and the right to exist, and at home as democracy hangs in the balance, we are called to love. When confronted with wrongdoing and injustice, even those that we perpetrate on others, may we be a people who stand with strength and courage, and work for reconciliation, healing and peace.