

How to Have Enemies

Luke 6:24-36

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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*“[Woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.
Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:24-36. NRSV)

When my sister Tricia was three years old,
she got in an argument with Heather, another three-year-old.
They were on the stoop outside our front door,
and Heather, well, Heather pushed Tricia down.
Tricia was shocked that Heather would resort to such brutality,
and she immediately got up, came into the house,
and told all of us about the injustice
that she had just experienced .
“Heather pushed me down,” she said.
And she kept repeating those words
into the next day, into the next week, even into the next months.
“Heather pushed me down,” she told aunts and uncles.

“Heather pushed me down,” she said to those visiting our home.
“Heather pushed me down,” she said to anyone who would listen.
Tricia said just the facts.
This is who I’m talking about. Heather.
This is what she did. Pushed.
This is who she did it to. Me.
And this was the result. Down, I fell.
I don’t know what Tricia wanted done about it,
 but she clearly thought that something should be done.
Heather was a problem, her actions were an insult to the Family (capital F),
 and she needed to be dealt with.

Yes, this was just an argument between three-year-olds,
 and, three-year-olds, as a people group,
 aren’t exactly difficult to topple.
And, believe me, as Tricia’s six-year-old brother at that time,
 I quickly got tired of hearing about The Heather Incident.
But now, I find something refreshing about it;
 and what I find refreshing is Tricia’s willingness
 to name her nemesis, what she did, and how it impacted her.

There is power in that.

I thought of this story again.
 as I thought about Jesus’ teachings that we have before us this morning.
Jesus simply assumed that his followers would have enemies,
 and so he taught his disciples first to love them,
 and, then, how to love them.

And so, if we want to love our enemies,
 the first thing that we have to do
 is to humanize them enough to give them a name.
There’s a reason why soldiers being trained for war
 are taught to think of the enemy in the line of fire
 not as a human being
 but “nothing more or less than a human-shaped target.”

In fact, I think naming our enemies is the first unnamed step
 to following Jesus’ teachings to love our enemies
 and to refuse to destroy them as a matter of vengeance.

After all, how can you love someone, in theory?

Who are our enemies?
Who are your enemies?

It’s not a comfortable question, I know.
We like to think that we have no enemies.
But I think it says a lot about our social location --

the people with whom we identify the most --
if we are unwilling or unable to answer that question.

Jesus knew who his enemies were.

Jesus' original audience, disciples who faced persecution because of Jesus,
all of those were suffering under Roman oppression --
they knew who their enemies were.

Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Hosea Williams,
and all of the men and women
walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama --
they knew who their enemies were.

Fannie Lou Hamer, sitting in a Mississippi jail after being brutally beaten
for registering people to vote --
she knew who her enemies were.

People who have been on the receiving end of racist, sexist,
ableist, homophobic taunts, laws, and policies --
they know who their enemies are.

An Afghan mother whose daughter and grandchildren were killed
by an American bomb dropped from an American drone
after American intelligence mistakenly identified their house
as an ISIS hideout --
she knows who her enemies are.

And all of those who have been made,
to be a litmus test for the church's faithfulness --
they know who their enemies are.

Believe me, I personally wrestle with what I'm about to say,
and it's this:
We are either missing the radical nature of Jesus' teachings,
or simply ignoring them
if we are unable or unwilling to identify the enemy
that Jesus calls us to love.

*How to Have an Enemy.*¹

This is what Jesus is teaching his disciples in our scripture text this morning,
and it's also the title of a recent book by Melissa Florer-Bixler.

She's the pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church,
and I find her to be so . . . irritating.

I say that in a good way, of course.

Based on her writing and what I know about her,
I'm confident that she would receive

¹ Melissa Florer-Bixler, *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger & the Work of Peace* (Herald Press, 2021).

what I just said as the compliment that I intended.

Florer-Bixler's book is a challenge to what she often sees among Mennonites.

People who see themselves as the middle of two political extremes.

People who say that the key to reconciliation
is simply more conversation and dialogue.

People who promote a third way
while using the way that strengthens the strong and weakens the weak.

People who emphasize the call to unity
while ignoring and thereby perpetuating
differences in power due to race, gender, physical ability, class, and education.

After all, those with the power over others have nothing to lose
if the call to unity doesn't include a call to justice.

Jesus' call to love our enemies is not a call
to remain silent in the face of injustice for the sake of a cheap unity
that is not good news for those in poverty,
that is not release for the captives,
that is not recovery of sight for those without hope,
and that is not freedom for the oppressed.

And, let's be clear.

Jesus' call to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us,
and to forgive those who sin against us,
also is not a call to remain in an abusive relationship
for the sake of a cheap unity that does nothing
to break that the cycle of abuse.

Enemies are real, they are potent, and they are formidable, Florer-Bixler says,
but followers of Christ "do not resolve enmity
by [either] destroying our foes or by finding middle ground with them."
Instead, Jesus ushers in a different system that changes the order of power itself."

"We love our enemies, Florer-Bixler writes,
"by creating a world that releases them from the wages of their own violence."²

Naming and confronting our enemies may be disruptive,
but it is an essential first step towards the freedom that Jesus provides,
both for us and for those who work against us.

And so, who are our enemies?

Who are your enemies?

Sometimes, our enemies are defined by our government,
when it kills people in foreign lands
in our name and for our protection.

² Ibid., 41.

Sometimes, I think, deep down, we know who our enemies are,
though we might think “enemy” is too strong a word.
These are the people we avoid,
people who have harmed us or those we love.
Some of these enemies are family members.
Some of them might be church family members.
Some of them might be neighbors.
As followers of Jesus,
our enemies are those whose work or desire or inaction
oppress the very people with whom Jesus identifies:
the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poor,
the sick, the accused, and the prisoner.

Now, do you know who your enemies are?
Maybe you should make a list.
Let that be your homework assignment.
This is not a list that I’d suggest sharing with anybody,
especially those who are on it,
but it might be a helpful reminder
of who Jesus is calling you to pray for, to bless,
and, simply, to love.

And, as a reminder, it’s neither loving nor a blessing,
to stay silent in the face of injustice,
or to call for unity without accounting for the power differences
that allow the injustice to continue.

And so, what are we to do?

Well, the first thing is to admit that we, too, have been enemies.
After all, as Paul writes in Romans 10, we have once been God’s enemies.
“while we were God’s enemies,
we were reconciled to God through the death of the Son.”
And so, having been reconciled,
how much more shall we be saved through his [resurrected] life!”
(Romans 10:11-12)

We know, we have seen, we have experienced
the emptiness, devastation, and despair
of the systems of oppression.

Jesus’ call to his disciples
is to end these systems of violence that dehumanize
both the oppressed by treating them less than human
and the oppressor by treating them more like gods.

Jesus doesn't want to simply invert the social order.
No, Jesus gives us the vision of the ways of a completely new kingdom,
a completely new kin-dom.
Blessing those who curse you,
Turning the other cheek once one is struck,
giving your shirt to the one who has already taken your coat,
lending to those who don't have the collateral to assure you will be repaid.

It's not hard to see the radical nature of these teachings,
but it's easy to miss how they make a public spectacle
of the oppressive powers and principalities.

To turn the other cheek, to bless those who curse you,
to give your shirt to one who has already taken your coat.
These all describe nonviolent confrontations,
not nonviolent withdrawals that wind up perpetuating violence.
These responses allow the offender, the offense and the way of Jesus to be seen.

This is what Christians do.
But notice what Jesus does not say.
He does not say that these tactics will work,
at least in the way that we normally think of success.

We don't love our enemies
because we've considered all the options
and it seems like it's the best, most reasonable, most effective choice.

No, we love our enemies because it leads us closer to God,
This is the way of God towards us, Jesus says.
This is the way of the God who makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall
on both the righteous and unrighteous.

The way of the God who loved us while we were still enemies.
The way of God who gives, gives, gives even when we take credit for it all.
This is way of the God who is found on the cross.
the One who lived, suffered, and died for us.

The way of who God who on the third day rose again
and now bids us to rise and to walk in newness of life.

Yes, this way does win in the end,
but we love our enemies, do good to them, pray for them,
give to them, not ultimately because of its effectiveness in this world
but because of our faithfulness to Christ and the world that is coming through him.

As so, may we put into practice what Jesus taught and lived
and what a poem by Kathy Galloway describes.

*Do not retreat into your private world,
That place of safety, sheltered from the storm,*

*Where you may tend your garden, seek your soul,
And rest with loved ones where the fire burns warm.*

*To tend a garden is a precious thing,
But dearer still the one where all may roam,
The weeds of poison, poverty, and war,
Demand your care, who call the earth your home.*

*To seek your soul, it is a precious thing,
But you will never find it on your own,
Only among the clamor, threat, and pain
Of other people's need will love be known.*

*To rest with loved ones is a precious thing,
But peace of mind exacts a higher cost,
Your children will not rest and play in quiet,
While they still hear the crying of the lost.*

*Do not retreat into your private world,
There are more ways than firesides to keep warm.
There is no shelter from the rage of life,
So meet its eye, and dance within the storm.³*

³ Kathy Galloway, in Janet Morley (ed.), *Bread of Tomorrow* (London: SPCK/Christian Aid 1992), 65;
https://wikipacewomen.org/wpworg/en/?page_id=3660.