

Loving Your Enemies

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[0 : 00] I want to spend a few minutes this morning thinking together about the gospel reading that we just heard.

Because in a world of brutal invasions abroad and political strife here at home and even profound divisions that exist within the church, if there is any section of the Bible that wants to make us throw up our hands and say, this is impossible, it might be this morning's passage where Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies.

And it's not that it simply sounds impossible. I think perhaps worse, it may sound a little bit naive. It sounds like the kind of thing a person who is portrayed in movies like *God's Spell* or *The Last Temptation of Christ* might say, a kind of trippy, confused Francis of Assisi figure who's wandering through fields of wildflowers offering these kind of vague platitudes that don't actually really apply to real life.

Here's the thing, however. We have to ask ourselves, if Jesus' teaching in this passage is ill-suited to the real world, what should guide us when dealing with people who are opposed to us or who hurt us or who are in some way opposed to our well-being?

If we are being honest, it would seem much more reasonable to live by an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

[1 : 59] And in fact, it is worth pointing out that even though Jesus is going to introduce an alternative, he's not actually critiquing an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth per se, because we should remember that the moral code behind an eye for an eye was actually a big improvement on what preceded it.

Moses taught the ethic of an eye for an eye to a people who had been enslaved in Egypt where they had experienced harsh retribution for even the smallest of infractions.

And it is reasonable to expect that having escaped Egypt for the wilderness, the children of Israel just imitated their captors.

And so Moses taught them a way to limit escalating violence. If they knock out your tooth, Moses said, you don't burn their house down, you limit yourself to that person losing their tooth.

In other words, Moses taught what was effectively a tribal culture, the virtue of a proportional response. So let's pause for a moment and let's acknowledge the comparative good of an eye for an eye.

[3 : 23] It actually moved human culture forward. However, Jesus knows that there is an inherent problem that remains because with such a code, the cycles of conflict just continue.

Perhaps those cycles are more self-contained, perhaps things escalate less. But what was it Gandhi said? An eye for an eye until the whole world is blind.

I recently read about a mom with two young children who were playing in the other room while she was fixing dinner. One was a five-year-old little boy. The other was a nine-year-old baby. And all of a sudden, the mom hears this terrible scream.

She runs in. She finds the five-year-old crying. She says, what's going on? The five-year-old says, the baby pulled my hair and it hurts. Made me mad. And the mom said, don't get mad.

The baby doesn't know how much it hurts. A couple minutes later, there's a second scream and the mom runs back in the other room. What happened this time? She said, the five-year-old says, now the baby knows.

[4 : 38] We are not unlike that five-year-old. In an eye for an eye world, when we get hurt, we want to ensure the other person feels some hurt in return.

Sometimes we let them know outwardly and we respond in kind. Sometimes we perhaps find more passive ways to let them know, such as withholding certain goods for a period of time.

So Jesus' words, don't resist the one who's evil. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. In certain respects, it breaks that cycle.

It disrupts the never-ending back and forth wheel of retribution. However, it also raises many questions as to what it would mean to practically apply this teaching.

So in order to grapple with this, I would like for us to do a little internal mental exercise. I'd like you to bring to mind, for just a moment, somebody who represents an enemy in your life.

[5 : 53] Okay? Now, for some of us, somebody immediately springs to mind, right? Perhaps it's someone at work or school who is a bully or someone from the past who has hurt us in some intentional way or betrayed us or worked against our best interests.

For some of us, the person who comes to mind doesn't wear an official label enemy, right? But it's someone in our life who we don't like very much or who bothers us in a certain way.

Or maybe they've hurt us unintentionally or unknowingly in ways that we might even be embarrassed to admit. The writer Anne Lamott describes herself as a San Francisco hippie who found Jesus.

And in one of her books, she wrote about one particular incident in which she tried to love her enemy. And she writes, I had an enemy for a long time, the parent of one of the children in my son Sam's class.

She seemed so driven and unaware that it might have astounded her to learn that we were enemies. But I can tell you that it's true. I knew she was divorced and maybe lonely, but she also had mean eyes.

[7 : 08] In the early weeks of first grade, she looked at me and my dreadlocks like I was a Rastafarian draft dodger and then over time as if I were a dazed and confused space traveler. It's true that I've had certain amounts of trouble adjusting since my son Sam started school two years ago.

There's too much to remember, too much to do. But Sam's first grade teacher was so warm and forgiving that I just didn't trouble my pretty head about schedules, homework, spelling lists, and other sundry unpleasantries.

However, there were all these other mothers who were always baking little holiday-themed treats for the class and who also seemed to read all the papers the school sent home, which I think is actually a little show-offy.

Also, it gives them an unfair advantage. They knew, for instance, from the first day of school last year that Wednesdays were shorter school days, and they flaunted it, picking up their kids at just the right time, week after week.

I somehow managed to make it into October without figuring out this one scheduling peccadillo.

Finally, though, one Wednesday, I stopped by Sam's classroom and found him once again drawing with his teacher.

[8 : 26] The teacher said gently, school gets out an hour early on Wednesdays. Ah, I said, and smoked my own princess forehead. Didn't you get the papers the school mailed to you this summer?

Sam sat there drawing with a grim stare. Somehow, my enemy found out about this. She showed up two days later all bundled up in a down jacket because it was cold and she was driving the kids on a field trip.

Now, wearing a down jacket is not a crime against nature or me. The crime is that below the down jacket, she was wearing latex bicycle shorts. She wears latex bicycle shorts nearly every day.

And I will tell you why. Because she can. She weighs one pound. She has gone to the gym almost every day since her divorce and she does not have an ounce of fat on her live, aggressive body.

I completely hate that in a person. I consider it an act of aggression against the rest of us mothers who forgot to start working out after we had our kids. The day of the field trip, she said to me, sweet as some flight attendant, I just want you to know that if you have any other questions about how the classroom works, I'd really love to be there for you.

[9 : 55] I smiled back at her. I thought such awful thoughts that I cannot even say them aloud because they would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of a cat dish. But eventually, it drove me to my knees and I prayed about it.

I prayed because my son loves her son and my son is so kind that it makes me want to be a better person. A person who does not hate someone just because she wears latex bicycle shorts.

I prayed for a miracle. I wrote her name down on a slip of paper and I put it in a small box where I keep those things I'm especially praying for and I said to God, here.

Now, you and I may not have particular challenges with condescending people who wear latex bicycle shorts.

But we all have those people in our lives that when we examine our hearts, we struggle to will good things for.

[11 : 03] These are people we find it hard to pray for even because simply to pray for someone is one profound way that we can seek another person's good.

And so, when we think about that person and find ourselves struggling to want good things for them, we might find ourselves kind of wilting under the challenge of Jesus' words in this passage. For some of us, it can almost feel like Jesus is dispensing with one law to give us a new and harder law to follow in its place.

So Jesus says, it used to be an eye for an eye, but now don't even resist an evil person. The law of an eye for an eye is now being replaced by the law of non-resistance.

No matter what this new law says, if somebody does something bad to you, you are simply to take it. There have been Christians who have read it in this way, and much damage has resulted as an effect.

[12 : 24] Reading these verses as a new law has been used to tell people who are in abusive relationships or victims of domestic violence to remain in that situation, or to someone who is being bullied or mistreated to not protect themselves or to not seek justice.

But to interpret this passage in such a way can only result from a profound misunderstanding of the way that Jesus teaches. As modern Westerners, the way that we think about teaching is primarily focused on content.

We want to transfer certain content from the teacher's mind into the minds of his or her students.

And in that model of teaching, you'll want to take notes or even record the lectures just to make sure that you haven't missed any of that content.

But the aim of the popular teacher in Jesus' time was not only to impart information, it was to make significant change in the lives of the hearers.

In Jesus' time, religious teachers taught in a way that aimed to interrupt the life flow of the hearer, to arrest their attention, to make an impression, such that they would walk away thinking about this and wrestling with it, struggling with it, all without having written down a single note.

[13 : 54] Let me give you a quick example. Luke 14. In Luke 14, Jesus is having Sunday dinner in the house of a religious leader. And in that story, Jesus notes that the host had invited only his relatives and well-to-do neighbors.

And he remarks, when you have people in for a meal, don't invite your relatives, friends, and wealthy neighbors who will only pay you back by having you over.

Instead, when you have a feast, invite the poor, the lame, and the blind who cannot pay you back, and you will be paid back when the just are raised from the dead. Right? You remember that story?

So, one way of understanding what Jesus is teaching here is that when you have people over for a meal, don't invite your friends or your neighbors or your relatives.

Now, depending on your relatives, this might become your favorite verse in the Bible. But this would be a mistaken interpretation. We appropriately recognize that Jesus is not forbidding us to take our mothers out for brunch on Mother's Day.

[15 : 10] Or to have our aunts or uncles or our financially comfortable neighbors over for dinner. Jesus is teaching in such a way as to get at a heart issue here.

He is trying to address the prevailing practice of neglecting those in real need while we share what we have only with those who will reciprocate by doing something for us.

And so, with our passage this morning, Jesus is not making a new law. Never resist. Always turn the other cheek. Never refuse anyone who asks you for something.

Rather, Jesus is getting at a heart issue as he is throughout the Sermon on the Mount. He says, you worship a God who does not give people what they deserve.

Who causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. You worship a God who loves his enemies. And so, Jesus is saying, rather than dishing back what you have just received, look for appropriate ways to be good, even to those who have not been good to you.

[16:27] To do this well will require us not to blindly follow some law, but rather put the heart of Jesus' teaching into practice in intelligent and thoughtful ways.

If you are in a relationship with someone who mistreats you, that person's good is not being served by allowing them to continue to do that. This principle applies to international relations too, by the way, but that's another sermon.

On the other hand, in our various personal relationships, there may be occasions in which someone who has been opposed to you needs something from you, even though they don't deserve it, and it would be appropriate to give it to them.

And then the question will be, do we have the kind of hearts who can do that? And then, how would we develop those kinds of hearts?

Perhaps that's the question lurking behind this passage, and I don't want to leave this in the realm of theory, so let's just spend these final few moments thinking about how we might practically move in the direction of loving our enemies.

[17:56] And in particular, there's two things that I'd like for us to consider. First, it's important to notice that Jesus does not start the Sermon on the Mount by telling us to love our enemies.

This part of the sermon only comes after he has said a lot of other things already. And if you're so inclined, go home and read the entire Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 through 7, and notice how the Sermon on the Mount is not just this hodgepodge collection of sayings, it is rather a sermon with a logic and a strategy to it.

The arguments and the situations that Jesus discusses throughout the sermon are actually stages in a progression towards a life that is fully at home in God's kingdom.

So we should take account of what Jesus has said prior to these words about loving our enemies, which includes instructions that lay the groundwork for putting this passage into action.

So, take, for example, anger. The ability to love others who oppose us presumes that we are aiming to put into practice Jesus' words only a few verses before this passage about not being controlled by anger.

[19:25] An enemy-like relationship is sometimes, although certainly not always, preceded by anger that we have nursed and carried around with us. Now, understand, this is not to say that anger in itself always, always, is always or necessarily wrong.

In its simplest form, anger is a spontaneous response to our wills being obstructed, to not getting what we want. Anger is a feeling that seizes us, a kind of primal alert system whenever we encounter resistance.

The question is whether, after that initial response, we have learned to bring anger under the control of the Holy Spirit. Have we taken note of those instances where we attempted to give into or to hold onto anger and have we sought to develop practical strategies to overcome it?

A book that I often recommend to folks that I have benefited from and millions have over the centuries is *An Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales who was the Bishop of Geneva in the late 1500s and a spiritual director to many lay people.

And the book is a collection of letters he wrote to one of his directees. One of his letters on controlling anger is just as relevant today as it was when he wrote it 400 years ago.

[20:46] He writes, it is better to attempt to find ways to live without anger than to pretend to make a moderate discrete use of it. When we find ourselves surprised into anger through our own imperfections and frailty, it is better to drive it away quickly than to start a conversation with it.

Later, he writes, when your mind is tranquil and without any cause for anger, build up a stock of meekness and mildness. Speak all your words and do all your actions whether little or great in the mildest way that you can.

There's an enormous amount of spiritual and psychological insight here. Each of us will, of course, discover other strategies for dealing with anger in ways that are appropriate, but we will find that as we become more habitually free of anger, there is more room in our hearts to love.

The second point I want us to consider about loving our enemies is the challenge of praying for them. Because to pray for them is not something we do only after we have figured out how to love them, but prayer is in fact a means by which we move towards love.

Prayer is the context in which God can work in our hearts and begin to do things in us that we are deeply aware we cannot do for ourselves, even if it takes a long time.

[22 : 17] Recently, I was listening to a lecture by Father Nicanor Austriaco, a wonderful Dominican priest who also teaches at Providence College, and in this lecture, he was talking to students at Harvard about how they might experience the good life.

And he was talking about how the good life is one in which we are increasingly free to love others, even those who are hard to love. Towards the end of his talk, he told the Harvard students about a confession he had recently heard from a young woman.

He didn't know who the young woman was. All he heard was her voice coming from the other side of the screen in the confessional booth. She had come to him because that morning in church, she had heard the passage that we just heard this morning, read about how to treat your enemies.

She told Father Austriaco that she was having trouble forgiving one of her enemies, and he asked her, who is this enemy? And she said, it was a family member who did bad things to me for many years.

She said, is there something wrong with me that I can't forgive him? And the priest said, absolutely not. It is entirely natural for you to be wounded and angry and want to lash out.

[23 : 33] He said, Jesus calls you to forgive your enemy, but he's not demanding that you do it this instant. It takes time to get there. So he said to this young woman, here's what I want you to do.

For the next 10 years, I want you to pray just for family members who do bad things to other family members.

And then, he said, for the next 10 years after that, I want you to pray for family members who do the things that were done to you. And then, he said, after those 20 years, you might begin to pray specifically for the family member who treated you this way.

the priest said that the young woman was encouraged by this and it gave her a sense of hope. But then, right before she could leave, the priest said, hold on, there's one more thing you can do as well.

He said, you can also pray and ask Jesus for the grace to forgive this family member right now. And if that grace is given, he said, you will find it in your heart to forgive him.

[24 : 49] And the young woman said, really? And the priest said, yes. He said, it doesn't mean it will happen right this instant, but he said, it does mean that it is possible for God to do supernatural things in our lives.

And that includes enabling us to love in ways that go beyond our own human capacity. what Jesus teaches us in this morning's passage is not a new law that aims to weigh us down by our inability to fulfill it.

Rather, Jesus offers us an invitation into the very heart of God's own life with a freedom to love given to us by grace.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, a season in the church calendar in which we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But let's remember that Jesus' resurrection came after a journey.

It came after Jesus' own long journey to Jerusalem where he ultimately died on a cross for his enemies and forgave those who mistreated him and hated him.

[26 : 19] God's love. We also can experience resurrection in our own lives. It is possible for us to experience a deeper capacity to forgive and a wider freedom to love.

But it requires that we go on a journey to get there. And the question we each have to ask is, what is the journey that Jesus is inviting me to go on?