

“On the Way of Jesus: Who We Love”

October 20, 2024

Based on Matthew 5:43-44. Jesus Tells Us to Love Our Enemies

It was not until I was in my early twenties that I truly knew what it meant to have an enemy.

I was working for the national church at the time, in a ministry to develop leadership among college women, and we were having some success. There were some similarities to what we do here at SPC, offering an alternative to folks who are often turned off by the church. As I headed off to my first General Assembly (Charlotte, 1998), I looked forward to sharing more about what it meant to claim a Christian faith that empowered women.

Lo and behold, out of nowhere came an ambush. A well-organized, well-funded campaign to cut us off at the knees came very close to succeeding, accompanied by the worst vitriol I had ever heard in my life to that point. People I had never met accused me of leading the daughters of the church into radical lesbianism. We were a cancer that needed to be excised from the church, they said. The last vestiges of Marxism were clinging to our skirts, they said. They even accused us of promoting pornography through the denomination’s website!

On the one hand, in hindsight, it was ridiculous. Thirty years later, I can see that. On the other hand, in the anti-gay backlash climate of the time, it was deeply wounding. We were pariahs, through no fault of our own, a rag tag bunch of college kids fighting off a Goliath assault funded by right wing think tanks I had never heard of who were using us to attack the larger social witness of the denomination (mostly around economic justice). They cared not one whit what they did to us in the process.

It hurt. Bad. And not just me, but my students. I said to a mentor at the time that I realized I had finally seen evil, right there in the midst of a Presbyterian General Assembly.

I am not proud of it, but the truth is, it hurt so bad I wanted to hurt them back. I wanted to call *them* evil and not just their actions. I wanted to become a fierce Mama Bear with a vengeance, and to win at all costs. I wanted them to beg for my mercy the same way I was begging for mercy.

I am guessing I am not the only one at SPC with a story like this. Unless we are living under a rock, somehow somewhere along the way we confront a person or a situation or an experience of enemy wielding power over us or the ones we love in ways that bring out the worst of who we are. Our enemy can be the church, our enemy can be a politician, our enemy can be poverty, our enemy can be addiction or cancer.

If, by chance, nothing or no one in particular comes to mind, perhaps it would help to turn the tables. Someone somewhere most assuredly experiences *us* as enemy. Those “other Presbyterians” saw me that way and some of them still do. Some of them were just mean, but others genuinely believed we were threatening their way of life.

If we are White and benefit from structural racism, we can bet someone sees us as enemy. If we are American and benefit from the military and economic might of a global superpower, we can bet someone sees us as enemy. If we are *homo sapien* causing the Sixth Mass Extinction of the rest of the world’s species, we can bet some creature sees us as enemy. Life on this planet, at least the way we are living it, simply cannot help but create enemies, at least at the collective level, if not at the individual.

Into that reality, The Way of Jesus has a Word to share. That person you want to call evil? Love them. That institution causing you serious harm? Pray for it. Otherwise, Jesus suggests, you perpetuate the very problem you say you want to solve.

I do not like it! I mumble and grumble about it. But the truth is, Jesus is right. This really is the only way we get well together. As our poet reminds us, *we can't not know how connected we are.*

To be clear, the kind of love Jesus calls us to needs fleshing out. This is *agape* in the Greek, which has exactly nothing to do with how we *feel* about someone. Loving our enemy in this context does not mean we have to *like* them or agree with them or convince ourselves somehow that what they did or what they are doing is okay.

This kind of love is more about a posture of empathy. It is about seeing the child beneath the tyrant. It is about seeing the fear within the vitriol. It is about looking in the mirror and acknowledging our own fearful inner child and our own capacity for evil. It is about holding the heart of who we call enemy with a genuine desire for wholeness, *that our enemy might be healed*, just as much as we might be.

And it is hard work. Which is why Jesus insists we pray.

As first century Jews, Jesus and his disciples pray three times a day, established in the rhythm of their lives to unite them with the One we call Holy. The way you cultivate *agape* love/empathy/compassion for your enemy, Jesus says, is to pray for their wellness three times a day. Daily. For as long as it takes. Which might be forever. But it really is the only way to live as if the realm of God is with us.

Again, I do not like it. But I did it, all those years ago, when my very first real enemy appeared and knocked me into the ground.

It took years to fully embrace the posture I adopted through the practice of love through prayer. It took leaving that job at the national church. It took a lot of therapy. It took growing up. It took the church finally changing its mind and removing the barriers to full inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community.

But I can honestly say the practice of loving this enemy, of genuinely praying for their well being, of working really hard to see them as human beings and not simply objects of my hate, over time, it changed me. I still have enemies; in fact probably now more than ever. I still knee jerk to anger and a desire to vengeance when I or the ones I love are hurt. But the loving comes easier now. The praying comes easier now. The confessing my own capacity for evil comes easier now. The gift of grace flows easier now.

Jesus says this practice helps us become spiritually mature, in the same way God is mature. Jesus says this practice leads us to live *as if* the realm of God is already among us, even as we wait for it in its fullness.

And that really is what The Way of Jesus is all about, in the end: a blessing upon the outcast and reject of the world; a beloved community that shines brightly in its blessedness; and living in radically right relationship, from the depths of our heart, with God and with one another, including - and perhaps most especially - with our enemy, so that the gift of grace may flow through us all.