

The Courage to Forgive: Loving our Enemies

Leviticus 24: 15-22; Matthew 5: 38-48

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“Love your enemies.” It is a teaching that is central to all that Jesus did and said. It is the guiding principle of his own life. Love your enemies.

It is not a teaching that I have found easy to understand or to follow. What ever you think about the war in Iraq, the beheadings happening there are devastating. I understand people fight with the weapons they have available to them, and we have air forces and armies that can cause grave destruction and there weapons are simpler, still I can hardly believe that we, in our day and age, are watching people being beheaded. What does it mean to love the people who are doing this?

There are some of us in our congregation that have suffered abuse and violence as children. What does it mean to love those who have done this to us?

There are those among us who have suffered harshly as a result of racism and sexism and homophobia. What does it mean to love people who live their lives with an attitude of hatred?

Doesn't loving the people who do these kinds of things somehow make us complacent in their attitudes and actions. What really does it mean to love an enemy?

The person who has helped me the most in understanding Jesus' teaching about loving our enemies is the Dalai Lama. In his book on the teachings of Jesus entitled *The Good Heart: Perspectives on the Teachings of Jesus* (Wisdom Publications, 1998) the Dalai Lama suggests that to understand what Jesus means by loving our enemies we need to be careful to read on to finish the rest of the sentence as Jesus said it. Jesus says, “Love your enemies so that you may be children of your parent in heaven who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and who send rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matt. 5:45)

The Dalai Lama says that this teaching of Jesus illustrates the Buddhist teaching of detachment which we

Christians often misunderstand and misinterpret. We think that the Buddhist concept of detachment means not caring, but what it really means is caring so deeply about the right things that we do not get hooked into reacting to the wrong things. The Dalai Lama suggests this is what Jesus meant by loving our enemies. It means treating people the way we are rather than the way they are.

It means defining ourselves -- who we are and the way we want to live -- and then treating people that way rather than treating others back the way they have treated us. God apparently does not get up in the morning and say, "Those people of Washington, D.C., have not acted well this week so they are going to get a hurricane." God does not get up in the morning and say, "I am going to send sunshine on those who are doing well. I am going to send rain to those farmers who are living right." God has created a universe that reflects the nature of who God is rather than what we as individuals and people deserve.

The meaning of loving our enemies is to treat other people the way we are, rather than the way they deserve. The term Rabbi Edwin Freedman¹ used for this was *self differentiation*, defining ourselves. He said there are three parts to it:

1. One is that we needed to know what we believe and what our values are, so that when we relate to others we do not merely mirror what we think other people want us to say or do, but we know clearly what our own commitments and values and beliefs are. We know who we are. That is the first thing.

2. The second part, he says, is (and this is the hard part for some of us) staying in relationship with people who believe differently than we do. It is one thing to know who we are and live lives consistent with our deepest beliefs and values. It is another thing to do this while staying in relationship with people who disagree with us. It is easy to stay in relationship with people who disagree with us if we do not let them know what we think. It is easy to think what we think if we are not in relationship with people who disagree with us. Rabbi Freedman said self-differentiation means doing both.

3. There is a third component: Doing all this while remaining non-anxious, which Rabbi Friedman said means keeping our sense of humor, doing it with a good spirit.

To love our enemies means not letting others define us. It means living from our center rather than living in reaction to our environment. It is not easy. Rabbi Freedman said that the most self differentiated people, the most mature people among us manage to be self differentiated 15 to 20% of the time.

Mostly we live our lives in reaction to other people. If they treat us well, we treat them well. If they are honest with us, we are honest with them. If they are nice to us, we are nice back to them. Jesus says anybody can do that. The question is whether we will choose to be good to those who mistreat us, because of who we have decided to be? Will we choose to be honest when those around us are being dishonest

because of who we have decided to be? Will we choose to care for others when others seem to care mostly for themselves because of who we have decided to be?

I have come to realize that it is critically important for me to take time every day to remember who I am. The most important time in my day is the 45 minutes in the morning when I walk from home to the church. It is my time for prayer, to think my thoughts and to feel my feelings in the presence of God. Most days during the first ten minutes of my walk, I am reacting to what I suppose most of you and the rest of the world want me to be and do. On good mornings, after about 10 minutes I begin to get in touch with who I believe God wants me to be and what I believe God wants me to do. Then when I get here to the church I am able throughout the day to be effective maybe 15 to 20% of the time.

Then, at the end of the day, I walk that same 45 minutes home. I process what I have done and ask God's forgiveness for what I have messed up and begin to let go of the anxieties that have built up during the day so by the time I get home I am decent enough to be with Jane maybe 15-20% of the time.

Loving your enemies, being who you are rather than reacting to others, is the hardest thing in the world. That is why in our faith is the image of loving your enemy is the cross of Jesus Christ -- to die to our own desire for retaliation, to die to our own resentments, to die to the anger we hold within ourselves, to die to our own will that we want to impose on others, to die to all that. To instead be loving when other people are not loving us, to be caring when others are not caring about us, to be generous when others are not generous to us, to be honest when others are manipulative, to be forgiving when others hold onto grievances. This is hard. This is the way of the cross. This is the only way to new life and to resurrection.

The great danger of having an enemy is that somehow we will become like our enemy. Our only hope is this grace of God which has made us to be God's children. May we live, not in reaction to the world around us, but may we live like our parent in heaven, who no matter what we do gives us sunshine and rain and more blessings than our hearts can hold.

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (The Guilford Press, 1985), 228-242.