

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
February 20, 2022  
Genesis 45:3-11, 15  
Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42  
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50  
Luke 6:27-38

## Loving Your Enemies

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

--Luke 6:27

Excerpts of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King's sermon at  
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama  
November 17, 1957

*In observance of Black History Month, today's sermon is an excerpted version of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr's "Loving Your Enemies." Dr King preached this sermon a number of times through the years, each time updating the illustrations to reflect relevant happenings at the time.*

*I have drawn excerpts from the November 17, 1957 iteration of "Loving Your Enemies" preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham where Dr King was serving as pastor at that time. Anywhere there is an ellipsis (...) a portion has been left out for the purposes of shortening the total sermon while maintaining its overall message and main points.*

*The full text of this sermon is available at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>*

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So I want to turn your attention to this subject: "Loving Your Enemies." It's so basic to me because it is a part of my basic philosophical and theological orientation: the whole idea of love, the whole philosophy of love.

Certainly these are great words, words lifted to cosmic proportions. And over the centuries, many persons have argued that this is an extremely difficult command. Many would go so far as to say that it just isn't possible to move out into the actual practice of this glorious command. They would go on to say that this is just additional proof that Jesus was an impractical idealist who never quite came down to earth. So the arguments abound. But far from being an impractical idealist, Jesus has become the practical realist. The words of this text glitter in our eyes with a new urgency. Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.

Now let me hasten to say that Jesus was very serious when he gave this command; he wasn't playing. He realized that it's hard to love your enemies. He realized that it's difficult to love those persons who seek to defeat you, those persons who say evil things about you. He realized that it was painfully hard, pressingly hard. But he wasn't playing. And we cannot dismiss this passage as just another example of Oriental hyperbole, just a sort of exaggeration to get over the point. This is a basic philosophy of all that we hear coming from the lips of our Master. Because Jesus wasn't playing; because he was serious. We have the Christian and moral responsibility to seek to discover the meaning of these words, and to discover how we can live out this command, and why we should live by this command.

Now first let us deal with this question, which is the practical question: How do you go about loving your enemies? I think the first thing is this: In order to love your enemies, you must begin by analyzing self. And I'm sure that seems strange to you, that I start out telling you this morning that you love your enemies by beginning with a look at self. It seems to me that that is the first and foremost way to come to an adequate discovery to the how of this situation. Now, I'm aware of the fact that some people will not like you, not because of something you have done to them, but they just won't like you. ...They're going to dislike you, not because of something that you've done to them, but because of various jealous reactions and other reactions that are so prevalent in human nature.

But after looking at these things and admitting these things, we must face the fact that an individual might dislike us because of something that we've done deep down in the past, some personality attribute that we possess, something that we've done deep down in the past and we've forgotten about it; but it was that something that aroused the hate response within the individual. That is why I say,

begin with yourself. There might be something within you that arouses the tragic hate response in the other individual.

... So we begin to love our enemies and love those persons that hate us whether in collective life or individual life by looking at ourselves.

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A second thing that an individual must do in seeking to love his enemy is to discover the element of good in his enemy, and every time you begin to hate that person and think of hating that person, realize that there is some good there and look at those good points which will over-balance the bad points. I've said to you on many occasions that each of us is something of a schizophrenic personality. We're split up and divided against ourselves. And there is something of a civil war going on within all of our lives. ... There is something within each of us that causes us to cry out with Apostle Paul: "I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do."

So somehow the "isness" of our present nature is out of harmony with the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts us. And this simply means this: That within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals. The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls "the image of God," you begin to love him in spite of. No matter what he does, you see God's image there. There is an element of goodness that he can never slough off. Discover the element of good in your enemy. And as you seek to hate him, find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude.

Another way that you love your enemy is this: When the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, that is the time which you must not do it. ... That is the meaning of love. In the final analysis, love is not this sentimental something that we talk about. It's not merely an emotional something. Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all men. It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system.

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And this is what Jesus means, I think, in this very passage when he says, "Love your enemy." And it's significant that he does not say, "Like your enemy." Like is a sentimental something, an affectionate something. There are a lot of people that I find it difficult to like. I don't like what they do to me. I don't like what they say about me and other people. I don't like their attitudes. I don't like some of the things they're doing. I don't like them. But Jesus says love them. And love is greater than like. Love is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men, so that you love everybody, because God loves them. You refuse to do anything that will defeat an individual, because you have *agape* in your soul. And here you come to the point that you love the individual who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does. This is what Jesus means when he says, "Love your enemy." This is the way to do it. When the opportunity presents itself when you can defeat your enemy, you must not do it.

Now for the few moments left, let us move from the practical how to the theoretical why. It's not only necessary to know how to go about loving your enemies, but also to go down into the question of why we should love our enemies. I think the first reason that we should love our enemies, and I think this was at the very center of Jesus' thinking, is this: that hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil. And that is the tragedy of hate, that it doesn't cut it off. It only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love.

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There's another reason why you should love your enemies, and that is because hate distorts the personality of the hater. We usually think of what hate does for the individual hated ... or the groups hated. But it is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates. ...Hate destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater.

...you want to be integrated with yourself, and the way to be integrated with yourself is be sure that you meet every situation of life with an abounding love. Never hate, because it ends up in tragic, neurotic responses. ... Hate at any point is a cancer that gnaws away at the very vital center of your life and your existence. It is like eroding acid that eats away the best and the objective center

of your life. So Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated.

Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That’s why Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they’re mistreating you. Here’s the person who is a neighbor, and this person is doing something wrong to you and all of that. Just keep being friendly to that person. Keep loving them. Don’t do anything to embarrass them. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with bitterness because they’re mad because you love them like that. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There’s something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. “Love your enemies.”

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That’s it. There is a power in love that our world has not discovered yet. Jesus discovered it centuries ago. Mahatma Gandhi of India discovered it a few years ago, but most men and most women never discover it. For they believe in hitting for hitting; they believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; they believe in hating for hating; but Jesus comes to us and says, “This isn’t the way.”

And oh this morning, as I think of the fact that our world is in transition now. Our whole world is facing a revolution. ... Violence isn’t the way.

Another way is to acquiesce and to give in, to resign yourself to the oppression. Some people do that. ... But that **too** isn’t the way because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

But there is another way. **And that is to organize mass non-violent resistance based on the principle of love. It seems to me that this is the only way as our eyes look to the future. As we look out across the years and across the generations, let us develop and move right here.** We must discover the power of love, the power, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that we will be able to

make of this old world a new world. We will be able to make men better. Love is the only way. Jesus discovered that.

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Yes, I can see Jesus walking around the hills and the valleys of Palestine. And I can see him looking out at the Roman Empire with all of her fascinating and intricate military machinery. But in the midst of that, I can hear him saying: "I will not use this method. Neither will I hate the Roman Empire."

...love is the only creative, redemptive, transforming power in the universe.

So this morning, ... I say to you, "I love you. I would rather die than hate you." And I'm foolish enough to believe that through the power of this love somewhere, men of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will be in God's kingdom. We will be able to matriculate into the university of eternal life because we had the power to love our enemies, to bless those persons that cursed us, to even decide to be good to those persons who hated us, and we even prayed for those persons who spitefully used us.

Oh God, help us in our lives and in all of our attitudes, to work out this controlling force of love, this controlling power that can solve every problem that we confront in all areas. ... let us join together in a great fellowship of love and bow down at the feet of Jesus. Give us this strong determination. In the name and spirit of this Christ, we pray. Amen.