

“Everything Is Holy: Our Enemies”  
Matthew 5:43-47

Whenever the topic of loving our enemies comes up, the name of Hitler comes up. Hitler’s name is often used to justify the use of violence and hate. We often say things like, “Jesus called us to love our enemies, but we can’t let people like Hitler kill innocent people and do nothing about it. Hitler was pure evil and nothing about him deserved love.” And so we go on with hating those we deem evil and feel helpless about following the teachings of Jesus about love in such situations.

Some of the challenge is that we have learned patterns of hate and anger that demonize the other so that we can protect ourselves. The thinking is often something like this: If we clearly identify the bad actors in society or in the world, we can then go about defeating them or avoiding them. That is how we create a sense of false safety around us.

Yet, great spiritual teachers throughout the ages have taught us that loving our enemies is essential to our faith and to the healing of our world. Holding the tension between treating everyone with dignity and love while not condoning injustice is not always easy. Here is a real-life example of this kind of love. In 1940, Gandhi wrote a letter to Adolph Hitler. Here is a part of what he wrote:

“Dear Friend, that I address you as a friend is no formality. I own no foes. My business in life has been for the past 33 years to enlist the friendship of the whole of humanity by befriending [human]kind, irrespective of race, colour, or creed. I hope you will have the time and the desire to know how a good portion of humanity who have been living under the influence of that doctrine of universal friendship view your action. We have no doubt about your bravery or devotion to your fatherland, nor do we believe that you are the monster described by your opponents. But your own pronouncements. . .and those of your friends and admirers leave no room for doubt that many of your acts are monstrous and unbecoming of human dignity. . .” The letter continued in the same way and then concluded: “Signed, I am your sincere friend, M.K. Gandhi.”

What Gandhi practiced was that fine balance of seeking justice while not resorting to hate. He resisted evil but without becoming hateful himself. One of the quotes attributed to Gandhi about this is this: “An eye for an eye and the whole world goes blind.” This is what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples about loving our enemies. Seeing the sacred even in our enemies is at the heart of our faith. Jesus taught this lesson in so many different ways: the Good Samaritan who helps the stranger who is potentially an enemy, the parable in Matthew 25 of those who help others in need, his outreach to the Samaritan woman, to the lepers, tax collectors, Roman rulers, the rich, and the poor. Jesus’ ministry included all. In the Bible passage for today, Jesus makes this even clearer that there is no doubt that he intended for all of his followers to live and love like he did. In this passage we hear a clarion call from Jesus to the people who were listening that day and to us today to open ourselves to the perspective of love that leads us beyond our fears and enmities with others.

People often think that there are only two ways to respond to an offensive behavior from others: Fight or flight. This is our basic instinct. You either run away from the problem or you fight the other. Jesus offers us a third way. Jesus does not call for a submit-or-subdue kind of response. He invites us to a new and creative third way. This third way is about breaking the cycle of the conflict and exposing and disarming its violence. One of the leadership lessons I have learned in the last few years is not stepping into the playing field of a conflict. The idea is simple and yet powerful. When someone comes with a complaint or an issue they are angry about, instead of just engaging it on the same level, the work is to help the other person see the problem in its larger frame and from a broader perspective. Let's pretend we have a coffee maker to be installed here in the sanctuary. Some will like the idea while others will hate it. Our tendency is to vilify those on the opposing side of the coffee maker. But if we are serious about the call of Christ to see the sacred in all, we have to approach things differently. We can't avoid the issue all together because that would solve nothing. Our work is to reframe the issue and engage each other openly about the greater good of the whole community of faith. Instead of stepping into the playing field to fight with each other, we allow a greater vision to guide us that even if the final decision is not what we wanted, we can still live with each other and work together as a community without hating each other.

I am not suggesting that this kind of approach is as easy as we see modeled in our culture when it comes to conflict. I know that it is much easier to hate and to shut the other people out. We know from the example of Jesus, that winning in God's way, may look like losing to the world, but at the end of the day, hate never brings any lasting change.

When we hear the words of Jesus, "Love your enemies," sometimes we are tempted to think that Jesus was naïve or so divine that he couldn't possibly expect us to love our enemies. We could also wonder about Jesus' sense of justice in the world. Does it mean that we let abusers or criminals get away with their crimes? Jesus offers us the opportunity to allow the sacred to emerge even when we are looking at the worst of what humanity can bring. Jesus' third way of resistance and redemption is about loving our enemies, but it is not about being weak. It is about giving us power about how to deal with a conflict without using destructive means. It is about offering our enemies a path for redemption. It is about learning to let go of our instincts of fight or flight reactions to invoke the deeper part of our souls to work for justice without violating ourselves or others.

Consider all of this in light of the conspiracy theories of our day. Someone recently shared with me a conspiracy theory about Draconians, or reptile people. The idea behind this is that shapeshifting reptilian aliens control the earth by taking on human form and gaining political power to manipulate human societies. We can laugh this kind of thinking off, but it is an extreme form of the dehumanization of our enemies. Take another example from the world of politics. The more viciously someone attacks the other side, the more money they raise. It pays to be divisive. If someone tries to reach out to the other side, they are often labeled as weak or not committed.

So if hating our enemies is the cultural norm, how do we follow the invitation of Jesus? I don't claim to have figured all of this out myself, but I know what does not work. Here are

a few of the things that don't work: 1. Accepting defeat 2. Avoiding conflict 3. Shutting people out 4. Gossip or malicious attacks (especially on social media) 5. Overpowering others 6. Ganging up on someone 7. Questioning the person's moral commitments 8. Asking others to take our side (triangulating).

The contemplative David Steindl-Rast shares some helpful practices for us as we try to follow the example of Jesus:

- Show your enemies the genuine respect that every human being deserves. Learn to think of them with compassion.
- In cultivating compassion, it may help to visualize your enemies as the children they once were (and somehow remain).
- Do not dispense compassion from above, but meet your enemies in your imagination always at eye-level.
- Make every effort to come to know and understand them better, their hopes, their fears, concerns, and aspirations.
- Search for common goals, spell them out, and try to explore together ways of reaching these goals.
- Don't cling to your own convictions. Examine them in light of your enemies' convictions with all the sincerity you can muster.
- Invite your enemies to focus on issues. While focusing on the issues at hand, suspend your convictions.
- Do not judge persons, but look closely at the effect of their actions. Are they building up or endangering the common good?
- For the rest, entrust yourself and your enemies to the great Mystery of life that has assigned us such different and often opposing roles, and that will see us through if we play or part with love.

A few years ago, I was a part of a group that put on a couple of dialogue pieces for our community to speak about mass shootings. We had people from different positions speak on the issues at hand and tried to have a good dialogue. We even had a non-violence expert, Dr. Barry Gan from St. Bonaventure, be our facilitator. It was a very difficult dialogue because there were two people who showed up with one intention: They did not want to have such meetings happen in our community. They did everything in their power to derail the effort for a healthy dialogue around the issue. It is easy at moments like that to give up or to give in. Loving the enemy is hard work and needs to be grounded in our awareness of the sacred. Only a deeper connection to the sacred can give us what we need on such a journey of transformation.

As followers of Jesus, we know that the path is challenging. Yet, we also know that we are never alone. Everything in life is sacred including our human conflicts. The divine presence can redeem what seems to be impossible for us to redeem. And so prayer is essential to seeing the sacred in our enemies. We will use the "St. Patrick's Breastplate" prayer as translated by Kuno Meyer. It is a powerful prayer of the holiness of all of life. Allow this prayer to enter in your whole being paying attention to any feelings that it evokes in you.

I arise to-day  
Through the strength of heaven;  
Light of sun,  
Radiance of moon,  
Splendor of fire,  
Speed of lightning,  
Swiftiness of wind,  
Depth of sea,  
Stability of earth,  
Firmness of rock.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me....Amen