

Leviticus 19: 1-2; 17-18; 33-34
Romans 12:17-21
Matthew 5: 38-48

Good Neighbors, Good Enemies
February 23, 2014
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Sometimes I think that today's Gospel reading has inspired more aphorisms and proverbs and turns of phrase than almost any other. Of course, there is "an eye for an eye," "turning the other cheek," and "going the extra mile" in our everyday vocabulary. But many people cannot resist a little more commentary on these hard sayings of Jesus.

Francis of Assisi: "No one is to be called an enemy, all are your benefactors, and no one does you harm. You have no enemy except yourselves."

Abraham Lincoln: "I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

G.K. Chesterton: "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people."

Mahatma Gandhi: "'An eye for an eye' makes all people blind."

Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

Nelson Mandela: If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.

Spiritual superstars, great writers, and political activists all give us wisdom on the ethics of conflict, just as the ancient Hebrews did, just as Jesus did.

In this episode from the Sermon on the Mount, which we have been following along each Sunday this month, Jesus continues his radical reinterpretation of Jewish law. He calls this the "fulfillment" of the law and the prophets, a path to righteousness that takes us beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. All of this reinterpretation is difficult to hear and understand, but today's teachings really go beyond reasonable social norms. Maybe that explains the need of so many people to comment and elaborate on them.

But, much as I love those pithy sayings, I find myself hungry for a more fleshed out, a more incarnational, way to understand the words. I need Jesus to tell me a parable, I guess, to describe how exactly an enemy is loved. How exactly, does one imitate the "perfection" that is God? There is no parable in chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew: just "do this" and "do not do that." So I will provide you with a parable of my own. It is a true parable, told by the director of a program for juvenile offenders, who told it to Jack Kornfield, a clinical psychologist, who told it to George Vaillant, a psychiatrist and writer, who put it in a book.

A 14-year-old boy in the rehabilitation program had shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang. At the trial, the victim's mother sat impassively silent until the end, when the youth was convicted of the killing. After the verdict was announced, she stood up slowly and stared directly at him and stated, "I am going to kill you." Then the youth was taken away to serve several years in a juvenile facility.

After the first half year the mother of the slain child went to visit his killer. He had been living on the streets before the crime, and she was the only visitor in jail that he'd had. For a time they talked, and when she left she gave him some money for toiletries or some other small purchase. The she started, step by step, to visit him more regularly, bringing food and small gifts. Near the end of his 3-year sentence, she asked him what he would be doing when he got out. he was confused and very uncertain, so she offered to set him up with a job in a friend's company. Then she inquired about where he would live, and since he had no family, she offered him temporary use of a spare room in her home. For 8 months, he lived there, ate her food, and worked at the job. then one evening she called him into the living room to talk. She sat down opposite him and waited. Then she started: "Do you remember in the courtroom when I said that I was going to kill you?" "I sure do," he said. "I'll never forget that moment." "Well, I did," she said. "I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you and bring you things. That's why I got you the job and let you live here in my house. That's how I set about changing you. And that old boy, he's gone. He's dead. So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone, and his killer is gone, if you'll stay here. I've got room, and I'd like to adopt you if you'll let me." And she became the mother he had never had.

This is one illustration of Jesus' teaching: one story of two wounded people. And it does not only gives an example of loving an enemy. It shows a way to understand that last mind-blowing instruction: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect." It shows a pathway to integrity, mercy, the congruence of faith and practice, which may be only way we can take hold of that teaching. What is perfection? That woman was perfect, even as her heavenly Father is perfect. She was holy as the Lord God of Israel is holy. She created life where there had been death; she transformed her pain into purpose.

The ancient wisdom, of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," found in both the book of Exodus and the book of Leviticus, may sound rather cruel and gruesome to us. But remember that it was actually a step towards controlling unrestrained revenge and escalating violence. It was meant to control the natural feeling of grief and pain and loss to measure out a limited response. If only history had shown that we are able to act with even **that** much control, even **that** much restraint. And when we have, we are left, as Gandhi said, with a kind of equality, but with unhealed wounds.

Jesus demands more than justice from us. Jesus demands fundamental change. He calls us to pull life from the jaws of death. He calls us to transform the very relationships of friend and enemy. And the mystery of it is, we do not do this only because it is generous to heal and bless the enemy. We do it because it is the only way we can be healed of our own pain, and drive away our own demons.

Years ago, I put together a curriculum for our middle school Sunday School class. For one session, I had the teacher – Lynne LaBombard, I think – use the following poem by Sam Keen to get the kids to think about neighbors, friends, and enemies. It's called:

How to Create an Enemy

*Start with an empty canvas
Sketch in broad outline the forms of
men, women, and children.*

*Dip into the unconscious well of your own
disowned darkness
with a wide brush and
stain the strangers with the sinister hue
of the shadow.*

*Trace onto the face of the enemy the greed,
hatred, carelessness you dare not claim as
your own.*

*Obscure the sweet individuality of each face.
Erase all hints of the myriad loves, hopes,
fears that play through the kaleidoscope of
every infinite heart.*

*Twist the smile until it forms the downward
arc of cruelty.*

*Strip flesh from bone until only the
abstract skeleton of death remains.
Exaggerate each feature until man is
metamorphasized into beast, vermin, insect.*

*Fill in the background with malignant
figures from ancient nightmares – devils,
demons, myrmidons of evil.*

*When your icon of the enemy is complete
you will be able to kill without guilt,
slaughter without shame.*

*The thing you destroy will have become
merely an enemy of God, an impediment
to the sacred dialectic of history.*

After that Sunday School class, Lynne reported to me about how disturbed the students were by this poem: the detailed visual, painterly way that Sam Keen pictured human creativity applied to hate. So we decided that, at the next class, the students could come up with a poem in response. They did, and it is called “To Create a Friend”:

*Start with an empty canvas
Sketch in broad outline the forms of men, women and children.*

*Dip into the unconscious well of your own deep faith
With a wide brush
and wash the strangers with a glorious cloud of light.*

*Trace onto the face of your friend
The generosity, love, and care that you hope to claim as your own.*

Search out the sweet individuality of each face.

*Remember all the many loves, hopes and fears
that play through the kaleidoscope of every infinite heart.*

Form the smile until it beckons you with its openness and love.

See that each form is molded with flesh like your own.

*Examine each distinct feature until it becomes an expression
of the true diversity of humanity.*

*Fill in the background with figures from your deepest hopes and dreams:
angels, loved ones, agents of good.*

*When the icon of your friend is complete
You will be able to give without hesitation
to love without end.*

*The face of your friend will have become
merely the face of Christ
the opportunity to serve, the source of our faith.*

What will you do with today's readings? Come up with a mantra, come up with a parable, come up with a poem, draw a picture? How will you seek to bring faith and practice into congruence? All we can hope for, perhaps, is to become part of a living parable, as we follow the one whose hands blessed, whose words challenged, and whose presence remains with us still. May God be with us, as we create these parables together. Amen.