Book 4

Sunday September 1, 1974

"LOVE YOUR ENEMIES" Matthew 5:38-48

"Love your enemies," said Jesus. Most of us no doubt look upon that statement as being impossibly utopian or impossibly sentimental. But Jesus did not mean it that way--so let's look at what it implies for us in our lives.

1. Note first that the phrase "love your enemies" assumes that we all have enemies. Here at least the Bible is realistic. Jesus did not say, "love people and you will have no enemies." Rather the Bible treats persons as real creatures in time and place, with real commitments, real interests, real opponents.

Thus the word, enemy, means that person or group who is opposed to us, who disagrees with us, who has different goals. So if we stand for anything, there are going to be those who disagree with us or who oppose us. G. K. Chesterton wrote that "Tolerance is the virtue of people who don't believe anything." Perhaps we can amend that to say that tolerance is only a virtue in those who do believe something.

So to love our enemies does not mean that we refrain from opposing and resisting our opponents. We need to know what and who should be opposed. Don't try to deny that conflict exists. Admit it. Then try to make it serve some useful purposes.

2. Secondly, to love our enemies does not mean that we have to like them. We often limit the word love to mean only those personal, sentimental, intimate feelings we have for another person. That is one meaning of love, but it is not the only meaning of the word.

Also to love our enemies does not mean that they are no longer enemies, no longer opposed to us or we to them. Nobody can command us to like what we do not like, for emotions cannot be directed by rules. But our actions, our behavior can be directed by rules.

What it means then to "love our enemies" is that no matter what we "feel" about another person or group, or how we oppose their beliefs, there must at the same time be some acknowledgement that what binds us together is greater than what divides us.

It is the personhood of the other that unites us in something greater than both of us, and the same is true of nations--we are part of one world. Thus to love our enemies means that our respect for this common ground of being takes precedence over our likes and our beliefs. This is the hardest lesson for any people and any church to learn.

We mistakenly imagine that if we could love our enemies, then we might become friends or allies and that does happen, but not necessarily and it's not even possible in some cases

Let's use an analogy. To love our enemies in the sense Jesus meant it, is something like the way in which true athletes love their adversaries or true politicians love their opponents. That is, they respect them as other persons striving toward an opposite goal. And they oppose them only within the rules that both obey so that the winner wins on merit, not on fouls.

We can learn something in particular from our much disdained politicians, not those who pull dirty tricks but those who are honest and straightforward and open. Often from the gallaries citizens are startled to see two legislators, recently in fiery debate against each other, now walk arm in arm in quiet and friendly conversation. The citizens are startled because they haven't sufficiently learned to understand the democratic political discipline: to care deeply about issues that one nevertheless must submit to the give-and-take of politics; to oppose a person forcefully today, knowing still that he may be an ally tomorrow; to honor a friend but still to investigate for oneself and often to disagree with him; to oppose people at one level while maintaining unity with them at another.

This is the kind of spirit Jesus was urging upon us -- not a sentimentality that tries to blink away human conflict or pretend that people can automatically like each other better than they do. He was saying that it doesn't matter if you like someone or not, it doesn't matter if you agree or not--the only thing that matters is treating the other as fairly and cleanly as athletes do in a championship game or as good politicians do in an honest debate.

Love is much more than just a personal feeling of liking or disliking.

There is a union that goes beyond sympathy or friendship, for there is no merit in behaving nicely toward people we like. Jesus put it in other words, "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?" The only merit is acting decently toward people we don't like or with whom we disagree, for this kind of love is an act of will, an act of justice, not an emotion or an intellectual conviction.

The good Samaritan who stopped to help the man in the ditch who had been robbed and beaten did not do so because he personally like the one who was hurt. In fact the person who was hurt was a Jew and Jews and Samaritans were enemies. The Samaritan helped the man because it was the right thing to do. In that way he loved his enemy.

3. All of this leads to a broader understanding of the word "love" as Jesus used it. In social affairs, in politics, in community life, in international law, love is represented by justice. We don't have to like the person who moves next door to us. We don't have to become close friends. But "love" as we are using the word here requires that we see to it that the neighborhood is open so that anyone having the money can buy the house next to us no matter be he Indian, Japanese, or Black.

Love is not fully love until it expresses itself in justice. It also means that just loving individuals in a broad sense is not enough.

Let's take the example of the Good Samaritan again. It was an act of love for him to take his enemy out of the ditch and see that he was cared for. Now suppose the Samaritan came the next day and found another Jew in the same condition, and dealt again with his wounds. Then suppose that on the next day and the next he met wounded Jews at the same place beside the same road, that he helped and cared for each of them. Suppose this went on for weeks.

Would we not think there was something deficient in his love if he never thought to ask who was patrolling that road against bandits? Suppose he were a person of power in the community. Would there not be something deficient in his love if he never thought to use that power to prevent attacks on travelers, even though those travelers were those he considered his enemies?

What if the servant of God whould give his last bread to a starving stranger in a bread line, yet never think to ask about the economic conditions that cause the bread line to exist?

To love our enemies also means to go farther than the usual tribal morality that loves only those who are innocent and virtuous members of the group. It means instead a love for the unlovely, the outcast, the guilty. They too are to be treated fairly and with justice.

Remember too that we can often learn a lot from our enemies, from those we dislike, and those with whom we disagree!

Sometime ago, I attended a meeting and as it was nearing its end, a man in the audience stood up and began haranguing the group on what it should be doing and wasn't.

I asked who the person was, and the person next to be said, "Oh, he's always doing that. Just a jerk who's always trying to stir up trouble. I listened carefully to him and he was undoubtedly a jerk, with a bad case of halitosis of the personality. But he also happened to be right in what he was saying. He was the only person in the room who came to grips with the real problem that all the rest of us were politely evading.

Isn't this often true? The decent, pleasant, attractive people go along with the tide, for a number of reasons, including our reluctance to be abrasive; while only a person supremely unaware of his obnoxious personality was willing to buck the tide and bring up some unpleasant truths.

So loving our enemies also means learning that intolerable people are often the ones we should tolerate the most; they are usually the only ones blunt or insenstive enough to remind us that the emperor is indeed naked. We all need our enemies for they help keep us honest.

An old saying goes --"an idea isn't responsible for who believes in it." People we think are bad or our enemies, or with whom we disagree can have some very good ideas. But too often we equate ideas or criticism with the sorts of people who propound or oppose them. If the Communists are for something, we tend to be automatically against it, even if it is a sound idea. The same for Republicans or Democrats, or liberals or conservatives. But the source of an idea has no relationship to its validity.

So loving our enemies means listening to them. In spite of the fact that we dislike some person or some group, what they have to say may be the truth and something we need to hear.

Most of us would be too timid or embarrassed to get up in a meeting and tell people directly that they are pussy-footing around a problem. It takes someone we call a jerk to oppose the general drift of a meeting; the rest of us merely grumble privately after we get home.

So we have an obligation to tolerate and listen attentively to the jerks in our society. We need all those we call our enemies. For the wrong reasons they may often be more right than we are. The pearl after all arises from a tumor in the oyster. ~~[illegible]~~ listen to them

So Jesus tells us -- Love your enemies. He might also have added -- we all need our enemies from time to time. Amen. they may be messengers of God telling us a truth we need to hear