Sunday, February 22, 1987
FINDING GOD IN ONE'S ENEMY
Matthew 5:38-48

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"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?
And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

This passage just read from the Gospel of Matthew is one of the most difficult ones for us as followers of Jesus Christ to put into practice. In it, Jesus is asking those of us who profess to be Christians to act differently than other people in this world. "If you love those who love you, so what?" said Jesus, "Everyone does that. Furthermore, most people in this world love their neighbors and hate their enemies, but you are to be different. You are to love your enemies."

Note first that the phrase "love your enemies" implies that we all have enemies. Here at least, the teaching of Jesus is realistic. Jesus did not say, "Love people and you will have no enemies."
An old man was being interviewed by a reporter because he had just reached his 100th birthday. "Yes sir," said the centenarian, "I'm 100 years old today and I don't have an enemy in the world."

"That's wonderful," replied the reporter, "You must be proud of yourself."

"Yes," said the old man, "My last enemy died about a year ago."

We all have our enemies. There are people we dislike and those who dislike us. There are those that we consider to be evil and who need to be opposed because we believe their goals are destructive not only of us but of society at large. Indeed, the fact is we probably wouldn't be much of a person at all if we didn't have some enemies. Jesus said in another place, "Beware when all people speak well of you." Perhaps he said that because if all people speak well of you, it can mean that you stand for nothing.

But why does Jesus ask us to "love our enemies?" What good does that do? In fact, earlier in the same passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus also tells us: "Do not resist one who is evil." That would seem to encourage passivity, weakness, and victim behavior in the face of malignant and intolerable evil. Translated thus, Christians become a doormat to be walked on, remaining silent in the face of injustice. And then surely Jesus' true intention is utterly lost, and the church becomes complicit with the oppressors.

Jesus' point, however, is altogether different. His own life is the clearest refutation of that reading of the passage. What he means is, "Do not resist evil by letting the evil itself dictate the terms of your response. Do not resort to evil by evil means." New Testament scholars have pointed out that the Greek word for "resist" used here is most frequently used in terms of an uprising, insurrection, riot, revolt, or battle. Jesus does not mean that we should not attempt to counter evil but that we should not counter it with violence. The question was not resistance or surrender but the kind of resistance: violent or non-violent? Does one best deal with his or her enemies with hate or with love? Jesus equally abhors passivity and violence as responses to evil or to one's enemy.

Again, I emphasize that when Jesus says, "Resist not," this is not to be seen as submission, but as refusing to let the enemy dictate the terms of opposition. It is not lashing back in kind. It is to act and not simply react.

This refusal of reactive opposition is one of the most profound and difficult truths in Scripture. Jesus knew that we tend to become what we hate. The psychologist Carl Jung wrote, "You always become the thing you fight the most."

The alcoholic who tries to "resist evil" quickly discovers that the very attempt to conquer the compulsion by main force is futile. The harder the person tries to quit, the more he or she fails; and the more the person fails, the less self-esteem and confidence he or she has to try to quit again. The experience of Alcoholics Anonymous members is that "resisting evil" cannot work. You have to acknowledge that you have utterly failed in all attempts to stop, that you have no power over the disease, and turn to a higher power and a supportive community for help. As long as we only hate something, we do not defeat it, but rather draw it to ourselves, and we, in effect, give it more power.

Prohibition was a grand failure at resisting evil. It drew so much attention to booze and engendered so much rebellion against legal restraints that far more alcohol was being consumed when it was repealed than before it went into effect.

What can happen to individuals who hate can also happen to nations. "By intensity of hatred," wrote anthropologist George William Russell, "nations create in themselves the characteristics they imagine in their enemies."

Conquerors throughout history have been conquered by those they conquer. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, proved either a shrewd student of history or a prophet when he reputedly said, "Even if we lose, we shall win, for our ideals will have penetrated the hearts of our enemies."

We want desperately to believe that our forcible retaliation to evil is like a projectile fired from a gun that will drop evil in its tracks. In fact, the situation is more like a ball hurled by a pitcher that will, likely as not, carom back at us or over the fence.

No wonder Jesus said that we are to "love our enemies," and not to hate them, for by hating them we only become more like them. It harms us and does nothing at all to change them. "The ultimate weakness of violence," observed Martin Luther King, Jr., "is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy."

Dr. Lewis Thomas, who has done extensive research on the effects of disease within the human being, now believes that the gravest damage in most diseases is not caused by the disease itself, but by a panicked over-reaction of the body's own defenses.

Have you not had the experience of being unconsciously attracted to the very enemy or evil you have most strongly denounced? Is not your very intensity against an evil a dangerous sign that it fascinates you? Literature is filled with stories of this condition.

Or to put it another way, have you ever caught yourself secretly pleased to hear that someone higher up the professional ladder you are climbing has had a crippling stroke? Perhaps now you can move up a notch, or perhaps you thought, "Thank God it was her and not me."

Jesus' invitation for us to love our enemies is the way out. It keeps us from becoming like our enemy. It keeps us from becoming what we hate.

In the East, whole systems of martial art and spirituality have been built around the awareness of the futility of counter-resisting evil. Though differing in detail, the basic orientation of all of them is using the opponent's own momentum and energy to disarm that person with as little injury as possible.

Women have long known through childbirth that to tighten against the pain merely increases it. To be able to surrender to the pain, to enter its core by breathing slowly and deeply, reduces the pain of the contractions. Others have applied the same insight to life generally; instead of trying to fight off loneliness or the shadow that scares us, to instead accept it, breathe with it, turn toward it, open-handed, and give it love, acceptance, and the possibility of gracious transformation.

Not only does loving our enemy keep us from becoming like our enemy, but the fact is that by loving our enemy, we can actually find God in our enemy — for God is there as much as God is within us.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus told, that's what happened. The Jew who was hurt and left to die in the ditch found God in the Samaritan, and in that day and age, there were no greater enemies than the Jews and the Samaritans. And the Samaritan found God in the Jew. To put it another way, we may very well meet Jesus in the process of loving our enemies, for Jesus is also in our enemies.

Furthermore, there are times too when we need to hear the message that our enemies have for us, and if we only hate them, we will not hear what they have to say, which can be for our good. Our enemies present us with opportunities for spiritual growth.

Some time 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 was not doing. I asked who the person was, and the person next to me 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, 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. He was telling us some things we needed very much to hear. There are times when our enemies may be messengers of God telling us a truth we need to hear.

To love our enemies in the sense that Jesus suggested does not mean that we will necessarily become close friends with them. Rather, it means to go farther than the usual tribal morality that loves only those who love us, or only those who are members of our own group. To love our enemies means to love the unlovely, the outcast, the guilty, and in so doing, we will be loving God.

Remember the parable of the sheep and the goats which Jesus told? He said that one day before God would be gathered all the nations, and that God would say to some, “Come, O blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you came to me.” And they will ask, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit thee?” And God will say, “As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.”

Love your enemies, said Jesus, pray for those who persecute you. In so doing, you can find God even in your enemies. Amen.