Sunday, October 10, 1993
LOVE YOUR ENEMIES
Matthew 5:43-48

"Love your enemies," said Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Now that's a troublesome teaching. It sounds like we're being asked to do the impossible. Perhaps so, but maybe not. Those of us who profess to be Christians are certainly being asked to act differently than other people in this world.

That's an important part of what it means to be Christian. The Bible says in another place, "Do not be conformed to this world." Last week in the sermon, we noted how early New Testament Christians were different from those around them because they ate with each other — Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, women and men. That was a revolutionary thing to do. They did not let themselves be conformed to this world.

There was a time, not too many years ago, when some people who professed to follow the way of Jesus thought that they could make the world around them conform to their Christian values. For example, many small towns and even larger cities had what we used to call "blue laws." Businesses could not be open on Sunday.

One person described his growing up in a small South Carolina town this way: "Our parents never worried about whether we would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down. One could not even buy a gallon of gas or go to the movies. There was a traffic jam on Sunday mornings at 9:45 when all went to their respective Sunday Schools. By overlooking much that was wrong in that world — it was a racially segregated world, remember — people saw a world that looked good and right. In taking a child to Sunday School, parents affirmed everything that was good, wholesome, reasonable, and American."

This same person went on to say: "It was believed by some that church, home, and state formed a national consortium that worked together to instill 'Christian values.' People grew up Christians simply by being lucky enough to be born in places like Greenville, South Carolina, or Pleasant Grove, Texas."

But such was not the case. I do not think that church people were ever justified in believing this about the world and the Christian faith, and fortunately, few believe it today. Furthermore, I believe that the decline of the notion that the church needs some sort of "Christian culture" to prop it up is not a decline to lament. It is an opportunity to celebrate. Why should we expect the world to do our work for us?

At the same time, we Christians have the obligation to work so that liberty and equal justice are available for all people. As Christians, we also want to help build a society where everyone feels safe and has the opportunity to be educated and to fulfill his or her highest potential.

But in addition, I'm thankful that in this country and in many other places around the world, we Christians are free to be faithful in a way that makes being a follower of Jesus today an exciting adventure. For example, I'm thankful that Christian parents can say to their children, "Such behavior might be all right for others, but it's not for you. We, as Christians, have a different set of values." There's always going to be a certain tension between our Christian values and the values of secular society and the world at large.

That's exactly what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Love your enemies." He is asking those of us who profess to be Christian to act differently than other people in the world. "If you love those who love you, so what?" said Jesus. "Everyone does that. But you are to be different. You are to love your enemies."

Jesus was not naive. "Love your enemies" reminds us that we all have enemies. Here, at least, the teaching is realistic. Jesus did not say, "Love all people and you will have no enemies."

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

But why does Jesus ask us to love our enemies? What good does that do? Earlier in the same section of the Sermon on the Mount, 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. It could mean that Christians become a doormat to be walked on, remaining silent in the face of injustice. 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 understanding of the passage. What he means is, "Do not resist evil by letting the evil dictate the terms of your response. Do not respond to evil with evil means."

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

For example, the alcoholic who tries to "resist alcohol" quickly discovers that the very attempt to conquer the compulsion by 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" in that way cannot work. You have to acknowledge that you have 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. If you hate an individual you formerly loved, then you are no longer free, but a prisoner of your hate.

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 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.”

No wonder Jesus said we are to “love our enemies,” and not 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 body, now believes that the greatest 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.

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 the same as our enemy. It keeps us from becoming what we hate. It frees us from our hate.

Whole systems of martial arts 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, as I understand it, is to use the opponent’s own momentum and energy to disarm that person with as little injury as possible.

The same principle also works in dealing with physical pain in our bodies. To be able to lovingly surrender to the pain, to enter its core by breathing slowly and deeply, helps reduce the pain.

Or take the mental condition of loneliness. Fighting it head-on does little good. Rather, if we accept it, breathe with it, turn toward it, and give it love, then there is 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 you or me.

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 the Samaritan found God in

the Jew. Remember that in that day, there were no greater enemies than the Samaritans and the Jews.

Notice especially how this parable defines love, according to Jesus who told the story. 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 lives next door to us. We don't have to become close friends with our enemies, but we do have the obligation as Christians to see to it that they are treated with justice and respect.

Perhaps this parable of the Good Samaritan, more than anything else, illustrates what our Christian behavior is to be in our culture. By helping the Jewish man in the ditch, the Samaritan was being counter-cultural. He was going against the traditional cultural values that said Jews and Samaritans were to have nothing to do with each other.

But now let's take that illustration one step further. Suppose this same Samaritan came the next day and found another Jew in the same condition of having been robbed and beaten by bandits along that road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and that each day he traveled the road, the same thing happened, and he helped and cared for each one of them. He kept on loving and caring for his enemies.

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

Seeking justice is also a profound form of love. What if a servant of God gave pieces of bread to starving strangers yet never thought to ask about the economic conditions that caused the bread line to exist and did nothing at all about those conditions?

So as Christians, we are to love our enemies because hating them will not help us or them; we are to love our enemies because frequently we find God in them, and also, sometimes our enemies can even be God's messengers. I remember attending a community meeting one night, 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 individual sitting next to me said, "Oh, he's always doing that, just a jerk who's always stirring up trouble." I listened carefully to him, and he was undoubtedly a jerk, but he also happened to be making some sense 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.

The "word of God" sometimes comes through our enemies. An old saying goes—"An idea isn't responsible for who believes in it." Sometimes it helps to pay attention to your enemies; you might meet God in them and hear God through them. So love your enemies. Amen.