

No Permanent Enemies – No Permanent Allies [OR I'm Pretty Sure When Jesus Said, 'Love Your Enemies,' He Didn't Mean Kill Them]

Luke 6:27-38 and Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on February 20, 2022

It's easy to love an enemy. Maybe not in the way that Jesus means, but we love our enemy, nonetheless. Enemies make clear who's in and who's out. Enemies force us to create rules, establishing an order that can be a twisted logic but makes sense to us. It's the reason why the National Football League and the International Olympic Committee have job security. We cheer for our hometown heroes and curse our enemies, making villains out of 15-year-olds. The cheering and the booing are simple in the sports arena. Our bodies respond to friend and enemy in predictable ways because our bodies' physiology is designed for survival, and survivors need to quickly identify threat and safety. That's it for today's physiology lesson. But it's an important lesson. Jesus tells his followers, "Love your enemies." It's an epic task. Some say it's an impossible task. Jesus' sermon on the "level place" began in the verses before our reading today. He outlined which blessings and woes belonged to whom. As Pastor Ann preached last week, most of us end up in both columns at some point, blessed or woeful depending on the situation. Right after that part, Jesus tells them to love their enemies. He tells them twice to love their enemies. It may be an epic task but Jesus, at the very least, is asking that we try.

"No permanent enemies – no permanent allies," is a guiding principle in public work with elected leaders and appointed officials. These very human people make decisions about education, criminal justice, healthcare, hunger, and more. Making enemies out of the people who disagree happens all the time, but it doesn't get us very far. Last Thursday was Lutheran Day at the Capitol. Seven Augustana folks from our Human Dignity Delegate ministry and I joined Lutherans from across the state online and in person. We learned about two bills being supported by the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Colorado. The first bill is a free lunch program for all school students and the other bill would make it law to automatically seal criminal records after 10 years for non-violent offenses so that jobs and housing are not impossible. Those of us who were in person met with our legislators about these bills. "No permanent enemies – no permanent allies" helps us keep the outcomes for people in need top of mind rather than our own squabbles.

Before our walk to the Capitol, Bishop Jim Gonia talked about the Joseph story that we get a snippet of in our first reading today. Joseph's tale of woe started when he was an obnoxious younger brother, the favorite of his father out of the 12 brothers. He was so special that his father Jacob gave him a special coat. His brothers threw him in a pit. He was found by traders and sold into slavery in Egypt where he ended up rising to great power. I encourage you to read Joseph's story in Genesis 37-50. It's one of the easier sections of the Bible to get through because it reads quickly and it's a great story. Bishop Gonia pointed out that there are many unlikely allies in the story. There are also unlikely enemies who were once allies and vice versa. "No permanent enemies – no permanent allies." There are just humans.

I wonder if this is part of what Jesus is getting at when he tells us to "love our enemies." We know from other parts of the Bible that he's not asking us to stay in abusive relationships or condone violence. Even on the cross, Jesus' death is an example of the logical end of OUR violent inclinations, not God's. Jesus' command to "love our enemies" must mean more than setting us up for an impossible task. Epic examples of loving our enemies can get in the way of seeing what's possible for us. Tales of Archbishop Desmond Tutu sincerely blessing a young man who screamed obscenities at him or murder victims' parents forgiving the murderer seem superhuman, beyond most of our capacities and compassion. But if I was a betting kind of person, I'd bet a heap of money that there were smaller steps leading to those epic "love your enemy" moments and also some epic fails. Probably two steps forward, one step back efforts clouded with confusion, anger, regret, and embarrassment.

Three weeks ago, we heard about love more generally in the 1 Corinthians 13 reading - love is patient; love is kind; love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. I preached about practicing love – buying time between our first reactions and our loving response. That kind of love is hard enough without adding our enemies into the mix. But here we are, listening to Jesus demand more from his followers than sounds humanly possible. Love disrupts, redeems, transforms, and frees. Hate is never redemptive. Hate is a race to the bottom, trapping us in systems of power and forming us into mirror images of our enemies. Jesus' invitation to love our enemies isn't about our enemies as much as it is about being set free from them even when they retain their power. Hate often evolves

into violence because hate dehumanizes our enemy, and it makes it all kinds of easier to do violence to them. Jesus leads his followers away from enemy-like violence.

A little later in the gospel of Luke, during Jesus' arrest, he tells his follower to put away his sword as he heals the person injured by the guy's sword. Loving your enemy has real-time consequences for them and for you. Love transforms the relationship by starting with ourselves. And love is the only thing that can drive out hate.¹ Many of the movements that changed the world have been non-violent, love-based movements – think Mahatma Gandhi, Rev. Dr. King and Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. There was unflinching resolve and deep love along with the conscious decision to not to turn into the spitting image of the enemy by returning violence for violence.

While sermons are targeted good news, they're often the tip of the iceberg. Much gets left unsaid because they're short. When we're talking about enemies and non-violent ideals, there is incredible complexity here that is difficult to get at in twelve minutes. For instance, Hitler would never have stopped unless he was forcibly stopped – world wars defy simple solutions. But at the same time, there are organizations taking smaller steps in this regard. One is named With Honor. With Honor seeks the election of military veterans in part because, having experienced combat or combat related loss of friends and family, veteran legislators have a “significantly lower propensity to commit U.S. military forces to disputes overseas” and “veterans are more likely than non-veteran politicians to work with their colleagues across the aisle.”² It's hopeful that the soldiers who protect our freedoms come back from those experiences resolved to find non-violent, diplomatic, bipartisan solutions.

As with any incredibly complicated topic, it helps to make a small step, picking one thing we can work on together as a faith community during the week. Jesus suggests praying for our enemy as one way to love them. Let's try that. Think of one person on a personal or national or international scale who you would call an enemy. Rather than sauce up the prayer with a bunch of words, let's try something else. If it works for you, and it's okay if doesn't, close your eyes and

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

² Read more about With Honor at <https://withhonor.org/purpose/>

picture that person. Now picture the light of God, like rays of sunshine above that person, and imagine that person being showered by God's light...keep picturing them... ..amen. You can open your eyes. Pray this prayer this week whenever you think of that person. In the interest of full-disclosure, I have to confess that this kind of prayer is not my gift. In fact, it's often a last resort or I completely forget to do it altogether. Rob and I were discussing it while I was writing this sermon and he can confirm this fact if you require corroboration. So I'm going to be practicing this prayer along with you this week. The prayer rightfully places that person, our enemy, in God's light and love when we are not ready to love them ourselves.

Jesus' reminder to love our enemies is also the reminder that God loves them as God loves us. That's the simultaneous offense and comfort of Jesus' grace and the gospel. Jesus' promise to be with us when we take two steps forward, one step back, or fall down completely is what strengthens us to try loving our enemy, especially when all else fails. Thanks be to God and amen.