

“Children of the Father”

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Based upon Prov. 24:17-18; Matt. 5:43-48

Last week I spoke about the importance of our recognizing what our marching orders are as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are called to follow his way even when it isn't the world's way, and to practice integrity and maturity in our faith, so that we won't be led astray by popular individuals or ideologies that are contrary to the Gospel. As those who have been reconciled with God through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we are called to nurture reconciliation in our world at all levels in his name, so that we will no longer be divided by race or gender, economics or education, nationality or religion. Nothing has really changed since last week. These are still our marching orders as Jesus' disciples. The only difference is that this week we have better idea of how challenging it will be to follow them. Although the election was called yesterday, the still contested nature of it reveals that our nation is even more divided than many of us realized. There were times in the last four years when we could convince ourselves that it was not this bad— that the media or politicians were stoking divisiveness, but basically, we all agreed on the same values. Now it appears that we are living in a nation in which there are clearly defined sides. That means that things are not suddenly going to get better now that it has been called. The antagonism with which we have been viewing each other, especially in the last few years, may be here to stay for a good while longer.

One of the things that happens when people feel threatened or in crisis and become entrenched in taking sides as a result is that each side begins to demonize and dehumanize the other. “That side is evil, and our side is good,” we think, or “You voted for that person?! Well then you need to be stopped from destroying our country.” Joseph Laycock, an assistant professor of religious studies at Texas State University, has made his career about studying, among other things, the politics of division.¹ He can provide evidence as far back as 600 years before Christ to the modern day of how the same allegations have been recycled again and again when people take sides or feel threatened. The so-called “enemy” is accused of doing horrible, immoral things like kidnaping or drinking the blood of babies, being sexually immoral, and either being demon-possessed, or serving evil or the Devil. The sides have changed over time. Sometimes the enemies have been warring tribes fighting over territory. Sometimes it's been Catholics and Protestants fighting over theology, or Christians and Muslims or Jews. Sometimes, as in the case of the Salem Witch trials, the demonizing begins with a seemingly unrelated military loss which made them question their identity and standing with God; other times the demonizing begins with a dramatic shift in cultural values and expectations that leave people feeling uncertain or grieving past ways. But it really is almost as if the same poster or play book is being recycled over and over again with the only edit being the name of the enemy. So, whether we think the enemy is liberals or conservatives, religious people or atheists, country dwellers, city dwellers, people of a different race or orientation from us, or whatever, the result is the same. Almost inevitably, we end up believing in our hearts and minds that a whole category

¹ Shepherd, Dax, “Joseph Laycock,” Armchair Expert Podcast. October 29, 2020, www.armchairexpert.simplecast.com.

of human beings is responsible for everything wrong in the world. We end up with enemies that we feel must be stopped at all cost.²

Apparently, humans do this as a psychological defense mechanism. In order to feel better about ourselves and more secure in our own ideology and choices, we need to have an “enemy” to blame for our discomfort with ourselves or the world. If they are wrong, then we feel right. If we hate them, then instead of feeling weak and vulnerable and insecure about the future, we feel can feel empowered and righteous and strong. It’s practically written in our DNA to do this; we do it without thinking.

It’s no secret that right now there are people in our nation who are convinced that the other side is the devil incarnate. They are convinced that the other side is poisoning everything good in our democracy and that they must be defeated and eradicated. There are people who look at their neighbors down the street now, and instead of seeing the people they’ve known for years who like to cook-out every 4th of July, make bold choices with their Christmas lights, and do better at managing the weeds in their lawns than they do, they see only the political sign on their front lawn which effectively marks them as the enemy. Maybe you see others this way too now. If you do, you are not alone.

This is heartbreaking and alarming, but more than that, for us as disciples of Jesus, this is also where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, because the Gospel won’t allow us to wallow in self-righteous hatred and still call ourselves faithful; heck, according to *Proverbs*, we aren’t even supposed to take a little pleasure if our guy wins. “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,” *Proverbs* warns, “or else the Lord will see it and be displeased and turn his anger away from them.” As disciples of Christ, we are called to follow Jesus’ way, not our own way, and Jesus’ way is not ambiguous. “You have heard that it was said,” Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, “‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Then as if he were reading our minds and all the objections that are already building in our hearts, Jesus adds the kicker for good measure, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” Keep in mind that Jesus at this point in his ministry in *Matthew* was speaking to a mostly Jewish crowd. To them tax collectors were the enemy because they worked for their Roman oppressors, and Gentiles were the enemy because they did not worship Yahweh. So, with these words, Jesus was pushing them out of their tribal thinking in ways they had never contemplated by accusing them of being no better than the very people they reviled.

“Love your enemies,” he insisted. When I was a tween, before I had strong enough ideological beliefs to perceive any enemies, I had a very romanticized view of what loving the enemy might involve. My favorite book in those days was a novel by Bette Greene called The Summer of My German Soldier, about how a 12-year old misunderstood and lonely Jewish girl named Patty Bergen befriends a young German prisoner of war who escapes from the POW

² *Ibid.*

camp in her town in Arkansas.³ Patty hides the prisoner, named Anton, in the attic of her garage, and spends hours talking with him about life. As they listen to each other and support each other, they become loving friends. For a long time I thought, “How amazing would that be— to help someone in trouble, to save him, and to recognize that even though the world says you are enemies, you aren’t really; you can be close friends.” When I read another book, Fahrenheit 451 about a time in the future when people “become” the books they love, this was the book I decided I would want to be. I would become Summer of My German Soldier.

Now that I am older and have strong opinions about what is right and what is wrong, however, when I read Jesus’ teachings, just like everyone else, I fail to get a warm and fuzzy feeling about his call to action. Instead I feel as if I have to confess daily to God, “Sorry, for having such thoughts about them,” or find myself thinking indignantly “Are you kidding? They are destroying everything you and I both value. I can’t love them.” I know that I’m not alone in my reaction. There are lots of commentators who basically dismiss Jesus’ words as soon as they read them. “He was just speaking hyperbolically,” they say. “No one can do this.” Some commentators even argue that Jesus knowingly asked the ridiculous and impossible of his disciples just to make them more grateful for being saved later despite their sins. But although Jesus was preaching hyperbolically to a degree, as good rabbis in his day often did, there is nothing in this text to suggest that Jesus didn’t mean what he said. He was asking of his disciples something more than the world or the Law asked or expected. Jesus does this repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard it said,” he says again and again. “But I say to you....” He was asking for them to give over their whole hearts to God’s way with no exceptions.

That doesn’t mean that Jesus expected his disciples to love their enemies romantically, however, nor does it mean that they had to love them like family or best friends, Patty Bergen’s experience notwithstanding. If you remember my summer preaching series on the different kinds of love in the Bible, the love in this text is not *eros* or *philia* or *storge*; it is *agape*: God’s love. In other words, Jesus was calling for his disciples to care for others, including their enemies, as God cares for all, even for those whose ways are contrary to God’s own. The rationale he provided for doing this is consistent with the kind of love that he chose. We are called to love our enemies so that we can be “children of our Father in heaven.” In other words, we don’t love our enemies because it is good for our society, or because it will be good for us psychologically, or even because it’s good for the enemies. We love them because God loves like this, and we were made to be chips off the old block, people who reveal to the world with their lives who our Daddy is. If we do this, then we will both take Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation to its completion and fulfill who we were made to be in the process.

This is what Jesus was trying to say when he said, “Be perfect as God is perfect.” If we translate perfect here as “being without flaw or mistake” then at first this seems even more unrealistic than loving our enemies. No one can be perfect as *God* is perfect. Moreover, as a recovering perfectionist, I know, and I hope you also know that no one should ever try to be perfect in a flawless way. Trying to meet an inhuman standard like that can be destructive in all kinds of ways. But Jesus was not actually talking about making mistakes here. The word that is

³ Greene, Bette, The Summer of My German Soldier (New York: Dial Press,1973).

badly translated as “perfect” is “*teleios*,” which is the Greek version of a Hebrew word, “*tamim*” which means “whole” or “taken to its completion,” more than flaw-free. In a way, it’s a play on last week’s concept of “integrity.” We are called to be integrated fully— so that God’s way is our way. We are also called to use our whole hearts to serve God, fulfilling our calling until the end, rather than giving God part of our hearts or part of our lives. When we do this, we heal not only the brokenness in our hearts, but also the brokenness in our society. We become integrated and reconciled inside and out.

So here’s the good news: we don’t have to have warm feelings for our enemies in order to be integrated and completed in this way. We don’t have to agree with their values or approve of their actions. All we have to do is see them as God’s children, just like us, and care for them as God would have us care for our neighbors, whether we agree with them or not. We can still talk about and work for our understanding of justice and righteousness while we do this. We just can’t allow our beliefs to make us see or respond to others as if they are less than human or less than beloved to God, because Jesus died for them as much as for us, and Jesus wants us to be reconciled to them through him.

Right now, when the sides are so sharply drawn, this is still a very difficult thing to do. I don’t mean to underestimate that. Many, if not most of us, are still thinking “They are the problem; we are the solution.” So, the first step to being faithful to Jesus’ command, I think, is to stop thinking of people as a “them,” as a category. We must stop thinking about all those “red” and “blue” people out there and start instead of thinking about individuals. Individuals are so much easier to love than categories. For example, if you saw someone with a flat tire in the middle of nowhere and you had a jack, would you ask that person about his or her politics before loaning it to them? No. If you found out that someone lost his job to the pandemic, would you celebrate his misfortune just because he voted differently from you. Probably not. I hope not.

The secret to beginning to love your enemy is to love the one you’re with (in an agape sense not an eros one!). Years ago, a science fiction movie called “*Enemy Mine*” illustrated this well.⁴ Made in the early ‘80s, the movie starred Louis Gossett Jr. and Dennis Quaid, and as the title suggests, was about two enemies. One was a human fighter pilot, and one was an alien fighter pilot, a sort of lizard creature called a Drac. (You can see them on your bulletin cover.) The two of them were in a fierce battle which led to them both crashing on a deserted planet. Since they had been in battle in the air, at first they still try to kill each other on the ground. But it soon becomes clear to them that if they want to survive, they will need each other. Reluctantly, they build a shelter together. Then, out of necessity, they learn each other’s languages. Then, after a time they move from using their newfound knowledge to insult each other, to telling each other’s stories. Then, after still more time, and having to face various life-threatening events together, the Drac shares the equivalent of his Bible with the human. As he reads about the Drac’s ideas on forgiveness and loving the neighbor, the human says, “Wait, I’ve heard this before.” “Of course, you have,” the Drac says, “The truth is the truth across languages and cultures.” In the end, they become friends, and after the Drac dies the human raises the Drac’s child and goes to his planet to recite his lineage with him.

⁴ *Enemy Mine*. Directed by Wolfgang Peterson. (Kings Road Entertainment SLM Production Group, Dec. 20, 1985).

I re-watched the movie this week. The special effects seemed pretty awful by today's standards and much of the acting is second-rate at best. But the message of the movie still rings true. When we take the time to get to know one another, and see each other as people God loves, not people we need to eliminate, then we can learn a great deal from one another, help each other, and maybe even learn to be friends or love one another. So, whatever happens in the next few weeks or the next four years, do not let yourself get sucked into "the enemy is a monster"-thinking, or "we're great and they are losers"-triumphalism. Think instead about how we are trapped on this planet together. Think about how much we could learn about ourselves and God's truth if we actually listened to each other. Think about their children and their needs as well as your own. Take it one person at a time until you can recognize that the enemy is in all of us, as much or more as in the other, and the way to defeat him and be made whole is with God's love. Amen.