

**Sermon Series: Give It Up!
Giving Up Enemies
Delivered on March 15, 2015
By Rev. Donna L. Martin
Sermon Text: Matthew 5:38-48**

A pastor began his sermon based on Jesus's command to love your enemies by saying, "I'll bet that most of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives. So raise your hands if you have many enemies." And quite a few people raise their hands. "Now raise your hands if you have only a few enemies." And about half as many people raise their hands. "Now raise your hands if you have only one or two enemies." And even fewer people raised their hands. "See," says the pastor, "most of us feel like we have enemies."

"Now raise your hands if you have no enemies at all." And the pastor looks around, and looks around, and finally, way in the back, a very, very old man raises his hand. He stands up and says, "I have no enemies whatsoever!" Delighted, the pastor invites the man to the front of the church. "What a blessing!" the pastor says. "How old are you?"

"I'm 98 years old, and I have no enemies." The pastor says, "What a wonderful Christian life you lead! And tell us all how it is that you have no enemies."

"Well, because all the old codgers have gone and died!" (How to Love Your Enemies by Rev James Martin, S.J., http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-james-martin-sj/how-to-love-your-enemies_b_841538.html)

The Lenten practice we will explore today is giving up enemies. It probably goes without saying that some of us have more enemies than others. But no one can be our enemy unless we choose for them to be our enemy. Someone else may label us as their enemy, but no one can be OUR enemy without OUR consent. Unfortunately, our threshold for "enemyhood" is often relatively low and can include anyone who disagrees with us politically, religiously or personally. But Jesus calls us to have the kind of love for our enemies that rises above differences and matters of opinion. Obviously, it is very difficult to do, if the only way some of us can accomplish it is by outliving our enemies. But regardless of the difficulty, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to make every effort to live as he lived and to follow his teachings which includes loving our enemies.

Our text begins today with Jesus telling his disciples that the rules they have previously lived by no longer apply, so he contrasts what they have heard in the past with what they must practice in the future as his followers. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, you must not oppose those who want to hurt you." He also says. "You have heard that it was said that you must love your neighbors and hate your enemies. But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who harass you." By asking us to give up our enemies, Jesus is saying, "there is another way to live; it's a way in which your primary goal is not to make sure everyone gets even, but to reflect God's abundant love into the world."

Now you might be thinking, "That is all well and good, but in everyday 21st century life that seems pretty impractical, if not impossible." So how, on this side of heaven, do we do this?

First of all, according to Jesus, we do not retaliate or oppose our enemy. This only perpetuates and escalates hatred and systems of violence. What we resists, persists. There can be no peace in our hearts or in the world if we do not learn to turn the other cheek; give, not only our shirt, but or cloaks also; and walk, not just one mile, but two.

Second, we are to pray for your enemies. Now praying for our enemies does not mean we are praying that they will slip on a banana peel or finally get what's coming to them. It does not mean praying that they will become someone different, someone we could get along with. It does not mean praying that they will come to see things our way. It means we are to pray for their good.

Jesus is asking us to do no more or less than he did when he prayed as he was being crucified by those who hated him, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." And the truth is, it will often take the supernatural power of Christ for us to pray that kind of prayer.

In her book, "The Hiding Place," Corrie Ten Boom tells the story of a time after WWII when she met one of her torturers from the German concentration in which she had been interred:

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there -- the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often ... the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself (6 Truths about Loving Your Enemies David MacAdam <http://www.newlife.org/node/473> .)

So, we are to pray for our enemies – and if we can't find it in our hearts to do this , we pray for Jesus to help us pray for them. But maybe some of you are asking yourselves, "Why should I give up my enemies? Why should I love them?" (Why should we love our enemies?)

Well, the first reason seems obvious. Because Jesus tells us that is what we are supposed to do if we are going to be his disciples, and it that sound too much like, "Do it because I'm your mother and I said so," then I have some others...

We love our enemies because hating the enemy destroys the hater (that would be us). There is an old saying that goes, "Holding onto hatred is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." A Chinese Proverb puts it even more succinctly, " Before you embark on a journey of revenge dig two graves," one for your enemy and one for yourself.

In short, hating our enemy harms us. It harms us not only emotionally, but physically and spiritually as well. Emotionally, hatred causes us to think irrationally, illogically, and sometimes even act irrationally and illogically, doing things we would not normally do. In this state we might do things that create consequences for ourselves or our loved ones.

Additionally, hatred unleashes a myriad of potentially harmful hormones into our blood stream. It actually changes brain chemistry; it stimulates the premotor cortex of the brain. This triggers responses in the autonomic nervous system, creating "fight or flight" conditions, releasing increased levels of cortisol and adrenalin. Short term our bodies can handle this and the emergency hormones dissipate as our anger does, but prolonged hatred has consequences because continuous production of both of these hormones exhausts the adrenal glands and contributes to weight gain, insomnia, anxiety, chronic illness, and depression (What We Can Learn from Fred Phelps: How Hatred Affects the Body by Jennifer Jennings

<http://www.examiner.com/article/what-we-can-learn-from-fred-phelps-how-hatred-affects-the-body>). In other words, if feelings of hatred are constant or consistent – you might be, not only decreasing your quality of life, but shortening your quantity of life – you are digging your own grave.

And although it should be obvious, hating our enemy keeps us from experiencing the full measure of God's love, thereby negatively affecting our spiritual lives. How can we be receiving God's love if hate is eating away at our heart? The two are simply not compatible. So why should you give up your enemies? So you can live a full life on all levels!

Another reason Jesus tells us to love our enemies is because hatred begets hatred. No good can come of this, so someone has to be the one to break the cycle. In Martin Luther King's sermon "Loving Your Enemies," he gives this illustration: "My brother A.D. and I were traveling from Atlanta to Chattanooga on a dark and stormy night. For some reason travelers were very discourteous that night. Hardly a single driver dimmed their lights. Finally A.D. who was driving, said, "I have had enough" as he powered his lights back on bright. I said, "Don't do that, you are going to cause a wreck and get us killed. Somebody must have sense enough to dim their lights, to break the cycle of hate. If somebody doesn't have sense enough to turn on the dim and beautiful lights of love, we are all going to plunge into the abyss" (Loving Our Enemies, Christian or Crazy? Sermon by Dr. J. Howard Olds from esermons.com or Loving Your Enemies Sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_loving_your_enemies/). No truer words were spoken. And Jesus asks those who call themselves disciples to be the ones who have the sense to turn on the dim and beautiful lights of love.

Another reason we should love our enemies is because it is transformative.

It transforms us. We were created in God's image and God is love. We are created in love to love, so we love our enemies through non-opposition and praying for them. We rise to the level of love that seeks to defeat evil, not the person who is caught up in it. We begin to love our enemies, not because they are likeable, but because God loves them. And as we do, we begin to see them as God sees them and we find we are being transformed into the likeness of the one who loved us so much, he died so that we might be free from hatred and its consequences.

But along with transforming us, loving our enemies can sometimes transform our enemies, not because we need them to change or want them to change, but because through extending Christ-like love, they too experience the power of God's transforming love.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "The best way to destroy an enemy is make them a friend." Now Lincoln was a man who practiced what he preached and his integrity bore fruit. For instance, when he was running for president, there was a man who went all over the country running him down. He said a lot of bad things about Lincoln, a lot of unkind things. And sometimes he even stooped to saying things about his looks like, "You don't want a tall, lanky, ignorant man like this as the president of the United States." His disparaging remarks seem to have no limits. But despite all this, Lincoln was, as you know, elected President. Once he took office and it came time to appoint his cabinet, Lincoln contemplated who would make the best Secretary of War and decided on Mr. Edwin M. Stanton, the very man who had made all those derogatory comments about him. His advisors were astounded. "Mr. Lincoln, are you a fool? Do you know what Mr. Stanton has been saying about you? Do you know that he has tried to defeat you on every hand? Haven't you read all those things he said about you?" Abraham Lincoln stood before the advisors around him and said: "Oh yes, I know about it; I read about it; I've heard him myself. But after considering all my options, I find that he is the best man for the job."

Mr. Stanton did become Secretary of War, and unfortunately, not too much later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. But if you go to Washington, you will discover that one of the greatest statements ever made about Abraham Lincoln was made by Stanton. Because when Abraham Lincoln died he is the man who said: "Now he belongs to the ages." You see, they had not only become friends, but Stanton had come to revere the great man. If Lincoln had hated Stanton, Stanton would have gone to his grave hating Lincoln. But through the power of love Stanton the enemy was transformed

into Stanton the friend. (Adapted from "Loving Your Enemies" Sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_loving_your_enemies/)

And lastly, the reason we should love our enemies is because it is this kind of love that will transform the world.

In his book Eager to Love Franciscan priest Richard Rohr makes the following comment about what it means to be a Christian. "(Being) ... a follower of Jesus... is an option, a choice, a call, a vocation, and we are totally free to say yes or no or maybe. You do not have to do this to make God love you. That is already taken care of. You do it to love God back and to love what (and who) God loves and how God loves! You either are baptized "into his death" and "resurrection" (Romans 6:3; Philippians 3:10-12), or Christianity is largely a mere belonging system, not a transformational system that will change the world" (Eager to Love by Richard Rohr).

We Christians are fond of talking about peace – we think peace is nice, we all agree we want peace. We sing "let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." But loving our enemies is where the rubber meets the road. The decision to do this, or at least try with all our hearts to do this, separates true disciples of Jesus Christ from those who are Christian in name only.

So I ask: Will you take Jesus' challenge to give up your enemies by loving them? Will you pray for them – not to change, but to be surrounded and blessed by God's love? Will you keep your lights on dim even when theirs are on bright? There can be no lasting peace in the world until we followers of Jesus Christ learn to do this.

Enemies – it's time to give them up! Amen.