

August 20, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

The Right Fight

Ephesians 6:10-20

David A. Renwick

This morning I am going to do something I have never done before: I'm going to preach someone else's sermon. I had never heard or read this particular sermon until this past week, but this week I read and re-read it repeatedly, and found that it was the message I needed to hear after seeing (on the TV) Nazi symbols and anti-Jewish banners in Charlottesville last weekend. And I found it particularly powerful and poignant because the preacher himself had faced prejudice and racism in its most brutal form.

It's a sermon of its time, 1961, and includes the word "Negro," and speaks about men and women, all as "men." *I have shortened it, but have changed very little else.*

Ultimately, I have chosen to use the sermon today because it's a sermon that focuses on Jesus' teaching on loving enemies, but then ends with a clear reference to our passage in Ephesians 6, the passage I chose about two months ago to read this Sunday. Ephesians 6 actually undergirds everything that is said: that we are in a fight against evil (the ideas of white supremacy and racism), *but not* against flesh and blood (against people). In fact, I found that the preacher was able to say *what I would like to say to you* this morning – and to say it better, with more moral authority, than I could ever say it myself.

Loving Your Enemies

Sermon Delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
on many occasion, but on this occasion at
Central Methodist Church in Detroit, Mich.
March 7, 1961

I would like to have you think with me on a passage of scripture that has been a great influence in my life and a passage that I have sought to bring to bear on the whole struggle for racial justice taking place in our nation.

The words are found in the fifth chapter of the gospel as recorded by St. Matthew (and in the 6th chapter of St Luke). And these words flow from the lips of our Lord and Master.

"Ye have heard it said of old that thou shall love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you . . .

Love your enemies.

Bless them that curse you.

Do good to them that hate you,

and pray for them that despitefully use you,

that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven"

These are great words, words lifted to cosmic proportions by Jesus Christ. But over the centuries men have argued that the actual practice of this command just isn't possible.

Years ago, the philosopher Nietzsche contended that this command illustrates that the Christian ethic *is for weak men, not for strong men*, and certainly not for the superman. And he went on to argue that this teaching was “just additional proof” that Jesus was *an impractical idealist* who never quite came down to earth.

But we have come to see today, that

- far from being the *impractical idealist*, Jesus is the *practical realist*, and the words of this text stand before us with new urgency.
- And far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is *an absolute necessity* for the survival of our civilization.

Yes, love is the key to the solution of the problems of our world. Love – even for enemies.

Since this is a basic Christian command and a basic Christian responsibility, it is both fitting and proper that we stop from time to time to analyze the meaning of these arresting words.

And so we may well begin by raising the practical “HOW?”

- How do we go about loving our enemies?

There are many things that we must do in order to love our enemies, but I would like to suggest just three.

Seems to me that *the first thing* that the individual must do *in order to love his enemy* is to develop the capacity to forgive -- with a naturalness and ease.

If one does not have the capacity to forgive, he doesn't have the capacity to love. Now it is assumed that the individual or the group who is our enemy has *done something* to hurt us. That individual has mistreated us or has mistreated our group, so to speak, and this creates a conflict situation,

Now, the only way to grapple with this conflict situation is that the mistreated person, the hurt person, the injured person, must develop the capacity to forgive, for it is only the individual who is injured or who is hurt that *can* forgive.

- The person *who hurts* must repent,
- but the person who *is hurt* is the one that must forgive.

And it is through this method that we are able to restore the moral balance of society or individual relationships, for in the final analysis, forgiveness means a willingness to go any length to *restore a broken relationship*.

Now you'll hear people saying from time to time, “*I will forgive you but I won't have anything to do with you.*” But one hasn't forgiven if he will not have anything to do with the person or the group that he is supposedly forgiving, because forgiveness means *reconciliation*; Forgiveness means the development of a *new relationship*.

And I submit to you that the *first way* that one can go about loving his “enemy neighbor” is to develop the capacity to forgive.

The second thing is this. In order to love the “enemy neighbor,” we must recognize that *the negative deed of the enemy does not represent all that the individual is*. His evil deed does not represent his whole being.

If we look at ourselves hard enough, and if we look at *all men* hard enough, we see a strange dichotomy, a disturbing schizophrenia: we are *divided against ourselves*, “split up” so to speak.

- There is something within all of us which causes us to cry out with Ovid the Latin poet, “I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do.”
- There is something within all of us that causes us to agree with Plato that “the human personality is like a charioteer with two headstrong horses each wanting to go in different directions.”
- There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with St Augustin in his Confessions from time to time, “Lord, make me pure, but not yet.”
- Or, We find ourselves crying out with the Apostle Paul, “The good that I would -- I do not, and the evil that I would not -- that I do.” . . .

And there is something within all of us, of this dimension.

And psychologists have tried to analyze it. Sigmund Freud calls it a “conflict *between the id and the superego.*” Theologians call it a conflict between God and man. But whatever we call it, we realize sooner or later that the “*is-ness*” of our present natures is out of harmony with the eternal “*ought-ness*” that forever confronts us.

And this means that there is *some good in the worst of us* and *some evil in the best of us*. And when we come to see this we begin to love all men. And we see an element of good *even in the person who is seeking to defeat us* and *even in the person of the group that hates us most*. And finally, we come to see that there is within every man the image of God, and no matter how much it is scarred, it is still there.

And so when we come to recognize that the evil act of our “enemy neighbor” is *not the whole being* of our “enemy neighbor,” we develop the capacity to love him: in spite of his evil deed.

The third thing that we must do in order to *love the “enemy neighbor”* is this. ***We must seek at all times to win his friendship and understanding rather than to defeat him or humiliate him.***

There may come a time when it will be possible for you to humiliate your worst enemy or even to defeat him, but in order to love the enemy – ***YOU MUST NOT DO IT.*** For in the final analysis, love means understanding and goodwill for all men, and *a refusal to defeat any individual.*

And so somehow love makes it possible for you to *center your mission* and to *center your activity* on the evil system and not on the individual enemy who may be caught up in that system

- And so you set out to defeat *segregation -- and not the segregationist.*
- You set out to defeat the *evil system of communism --not the communist.*

And there is a great deal of difference there: there must be an active love for the individuals who may be caught up in an evil unjust system even while we continue to work passionately and unrelentingly to do away with the system itself.

The Greek language comes to our aid when we seek to analyze the meaning of love, with special reference to our enemies. There are different words in the Greek language for love.

There is the word **EROS**, for instance.

It has come to us to mean a sort of romantic love, and so in that sense we all know about eros.

This is a beautiful and vital type of love.

Then the Greek language talks about **FILIO**.

Filio is a sort of intimate affection between personal friends. It is friendship -- a reciprocal love: you love – you have *filio* – for the people that you like.

Then the Greek language has another word for love: called **AGAPE**.

- Agape is *more than romantic love*.
- Agape is *more than friendship*.
- Agape is *understanding, redemptive, goodwill towards all*
- Agape is an overflowing love, a spontaneous love, which seeks nothing in return

And theologians would say that *this is the love of God* operating in the human heart. When you rise to love on this level you love all men,

- not because you *like* them,
- not because their ways appeal to you,
- not because they are *of worth* to you,

but you love all men *because God loves them*. And you rise to the noble heights of loving the person who does *the evil deed*, while hating the deed that *the person* does. And I think this is what Jesus means when he says, "*Love your enemies.*"

And I'm so happy he didn't say, "Like your enemies," because it's kind-of-difficult to like some people! "Like" is sentimental. "Like" is an affectionate sort of thing *and you can't "like" anybody who's bombing your home and threatening your children*. It's difficult to like them But, Jesus says, "Love them!" Love is greater than "like." **Agape Love** is *understanding, redemptive, creative goodwill for all men*.

And so Jesus was expressing something very creative when he said,

"Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that spitefully use you."

Now for the moments left, let us turn from the practical "**How?**" to the theoretical "**Why?**" and ask the vital and valid question, "*Why should we love our enemies?*"

I would say the first reason, (and I'm sure Jesus had this in mind), that we should love our enemies is this: *to return evil for evil only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe*.

And somewhere along the way of life, somebody must have *sense* enough, somebody must have *morality* enough, somebody must have *religion* enough, to cut off the chain of hate and evil.

And this can only be done by *meeting hate with love*. For you see in a real sense, *if we return hate for hate, violence for violence, and all of that, it just ends up destroying everybody*. And nobody wins in the long run.

- And it is *the strong man* who stands up in the midst of violence and refuses to return it.
- It is the *strong man, not the weak man*, who stands up in the midst of hate and returns love.

Some time ago, my brother and I were driving from Atlanta, Georgia, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. He was driving the car, and it was late at night, and for some reason most of the drivers were discourteous that night. They just didn't dim their lights as they approached our car. Everybody was forgetting to dim lights that night.

And my brother got angry, and he said, "I know what I'm going to do: *"The next car that comes along this highway and fails to dim its lights, I'm going to refuse to dim mine, and I'm going to keep these lights on in all of their glaring outpour."*

And I looked up and I said, “*Wait a minute. Don’t you do that, for if you refuse to dim your lights, there will be a little too much light on this highway and it may end up in destruction for all of us. Somebody will have to have sense enough on this highway to dim their lights.*”

And maybe here we find an analogy to the whole struggle of life: somebody must have sense enough to dim their lights!

Hate begets hate. Force begets force. Violence begets violence. Toughness begets toughness. *And it is all a descending spiral ending in destruction for everybody.* And so Jesus is right: Love is the answer

The second point is this: that we should love our enemies because hate damages the personality and injures the soul.

So often, we talk about what hate does to the hated person or to the hated group, and we think of the damages that we find in the hate process as it moves toward the object of hate.

So when we look in our nation and we look in the South in particular, we begin to talk about how much it damages the Negro for the white man to hate him, and what this hate --on the part of the white group – is doing to destroy the Negro, and what it is doing to destroy the physical comfort, and the individual’s freedom, and the collective freedom – of the Negro.

And that is true, it does destroy this.

But so often we overlook the fact that hate is as damaging to the subject of hate as it is to the object of hate.

Hate damages a white man, in many instances, more than it damages the Negro, for it does something to the personality, it does something to the soul. And this is why I say that *our struggle in the United States today is not merely a struggle to free the Negro, but it is a struggle to free our white brothers, from their fears, from their prejudices, from their hate, and all of those attitudes that destroy and damage the soul.*

Some time ago, I was reading an essay, by Dr. E Franklin Frazier, the outstanding sociologist of Howard University, and it’s called “The Pathology of Racial Prejudice.” . . . and this is what hate will do: it leads to pathological ends.

But long ago, Jesus realized this.

Jesus realized that hate does something to the personality of the hater.

- So the individual who hates can’t see right.
- The individual who hates can’t walk right.
- The individual who hates loses his sense of objectivity and his sense of values.

And so for the individual who hates,

- The *beautiful* becomes ugly, and the ugly becomes beautiful.
- The *true* becomes false, and the false becomes true.
- The *evil* becomes good, and the good becomes evil.

The *person who hates* loses the power of rationality and objectivity. And so again Jesus was right –

*“Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you.
Pray for them that spitefully use you.”*

because hate can destroy the personality.

And finally, we must love our enemies because love has within its very power – transforming qualities.

Think about it:

- Hate serves to destroy. Love serves to build up.
- Hate seeks destructive ends. Love seeks constructive ends.
- Hate seeks to annihilate. Love seeks to convert
- Hate seeks to live in monologue. Love seeks to live in dialogue.

And it is only through love that we are able to redeem and transform the “enemy neighbor.”

And so when Jesus says, “Love the enemy,” he’s saying, “love the enemy because there is something about love that can transform, that can change, that can arouse the conscience of the enemy. And only by doing this are you able to transform the *jangling discords of society into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood and understanding.*

We must learn to say to all those reactionaries who have blocked the road to progress:

- Do to us what you will, **and we will still love you.**
- We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering.
- We will meet your physical force with soul force. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.
- And so put us in jail, and we will go in with humble smiles on our faces, still loving you.
- Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we will still love you.
- Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit morally, culturally, and otherwise for integration, and we will still love you.
- Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours, and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead, and we will still love you.

But be assured that we will wear you down, (yes *indeed*), by our capacity to suffer. And [DR: Dr. King says this later in the original sermon] this is the meaning of the cross! And one day we will win our freedom, but not only will we win freedom for **ourselves**, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that **we will win you** in the process. And so our victory will be a double victory.

This seems to me the only answer and the only way to make our nation *a new nation*, and our world *a new world.* **Love is the absolute power.**

Years ago, Napoleon said something like this:

*“Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I, have built great empires:
-- but upon what did they depend? They depended upon force.
But years ago, Jesus built an empire that depended upon love.
And even to this day, millions will die for him.*

And that is the meaning of love. As we watch Jesus the Christ and see him as he starts out, standing amid the intricate and fascinating military machinery of the Roman Empire, it seems that we can hear him saying [DR: with Paul in Ephesians 6]: **“I will not use these methods.”**

- **I will take the ammunition of love**
- **and put on the breastplate of righteousness**
- **and the whole armor of God -- And just start marching.**

And this was what he did. And through *this approach* he was able to shake the hinges from the gates of the Roman Empire. And through his life, he was able to transform history and split history into AD and BC.

And so this morning, as I look into your eyes, as I lift my eyes beyond you, and look into the eyes of the peoples of the world, ***I love you***. I would rather die than hate you. And I believe that *my* spirit can meet *your* spirit, and *your* spirit, through this process, will meet *my* spirit, and through this ***collision of spirits***, the kingdom of God will finally emerge.

There is still a voice crying even this day, saying,

“Love your enemies (Yes) Bless them that curse you.

Do good to them that hate you

Pray for them that despitefully use you”

And only through this method can you matriculate into the university of eternal life

That’s what Dr. King said so powerfully and poignantly over 50 years ago. **Love your enemies means**

1. The power to forgive
2. Seeing the image of God in the other
3. knowing your own internal conflicts and moral weakness
4. refusing to humiliate or crush your opponent
5. being the first to break the downward spiral of hate
6. not allowing hatred to damage our own souls, or the soul of our nation
7. but allowing love – including our willingness to suffer– to be God’s agent of transformation.

This is the meaning of *the cross*. This is the meaning of the fight in which we put on *the whole armor of God*: Remembering that we do not fight against flesh and blood but against the wiles of the devil. This is what I believe myself, and what I believe we have all been called to follow.

LET US PRAY

(This prayer was Dr. King’s prayer at the close of this sermon)

Oh God, our gracious heavenly Father,

we thank Thee for the inspiration of Jesus the Christ.

And grant that we will love Thee with all of our hearts, souls, and minds,

and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors.

And we ask Thee, Oh God, in these days of emotional tension,

when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawning.

Amen

In his November 9 version of this sermon, King continued ‘Abraham Lincoln would have not transformed and redeemed Stanton, Stanton would have gone to his grave hating Lincoln, and Lincoln would have gone to his grave hating Stanton. But through the power of love, Abraham Lincoln was able to redeem Stanton. That’s it. There is a power in love that our world has not discovered yet.

Jesus discovered it centuries ago. Mahatma Gandhi of India discovered it a few years ago, but most men and most women never discover it.

For they believe in hitting for hitting, they believe in an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, they believe in hating-for-hating.

But Jesus comes to us and says, ‘This Isn’t the way’
(‘Loving Your Enemies,” Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in *Papers* 4 322)

2 King kept a handwritten version of this illustration, drawn from Henry H Halley, in his sermon file

428 (King, ‘Conclusion,” 1948-1954, Halley, *Pocket Bible Handbook* [Chicago H. H. Halley, 19411, p 321)

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800