

AND WHO IS MY ENEMY?

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Grace Church in New York
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
February 24, 2019

Jesus said, *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”* (Luke 6:27)

And who, might I ask, is my enemy? Much in the news this week has been the saga of Hoda Muthana, a young woman born in the United States, the daughter of a Yemeni diplomat. In November of 2014, when she was a 20-year old student in Alabama, Muthana managed to get herself smuggled into Syria, where she joined the terrorist group ISIS. Over the next four years she would marry three jihadi fighters (all of them killed), bear a son to one of them, and use her Twitter account to send incendiary messages around the world. In one tweet she praised the perpetrators of a terrorist attack in Paris. In another she encouraged American Muslims to follow her path and come join ISIS. In still another she tried to rouse potential terrorists on these shores, writing, *“Americans wake up! You have much to do while you live under our greatest enemy, enough of your sleeping! Go on drive-bys and spill all of their blood, or rent a big truck and drive all over them.”*

Four years later ISIS is a shadow of what it used to be. Muthana finds herself in a Syrian refugee camp, deeply regretting her actions and desperately wanting to come home. Even if it means being convicted of treason and spending decades in prison, she wants to return for the sake of her 18-month old son, so that he can have a chance at a decent life in America. Well, not so fast. In fact, not at all, says the Federal government, now initiating proceedings to strip Hoda Muthana of her citizenship. This young woman, they say, gave aid and comfort to those at war with the United States, which means that she herself is an enemy of the state who cannot be allowed to return. Many are all-too willing to agree. Others suggest that a civilized society has no permanent enemies, and works to reclaim even its most errant citizens. What do you think? What should be done? Who is my enemy?

Jesus said, *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”* None of us will go through life without bumping up against people we find objectionable. The question is, at what point does someone cross the line between being an unwelcome presence to being an outright enemy? The boss who demands too much and gives too little, the colleague who disappoints or even sabotages you, the friend who didn’t stand up for you, the family member who betrayed you: are these to be counted among your enemies? It seems to me that once you crown someone with the exalted title of sworn enemy, you commit yourself to devoting all sorts of spiritual and emotional energy to this person. In short, you are accepting one of the world’s many invitations to hate, which is to risk putting yourself on the path to hell. In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke Jesus proposes a drastic alternative: love your enemies. He invites us – no, he commands us – to love not only those who love us, but especially those who hate and curse and abuse us. Why would people want to love those who hate and curse and abuse them? The answer is, blessed are those who do. Those who resist the invitation to hate and even take up the challenge to love an enemy are blessed – even happy, as some would translate these words of Jesus.

If you want an example of someone who discovered the paradoxical blessings of God by choosing to love his enemies, consider Joseph in today’s Old Testament reading from Genesis (45:3-11, 15). Joseph was the favored son of Jacob, and even sported a colorful coat to prove it.

Out of envy, Joseph's brother's stripped him of his robe and sold him into slavery. Then to cover their crime they dipped the robe in animal blood and told Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. Joseph was taken down to Egypt and through a strange set of circumstances found himself in Pharaoh's court, rising in influence. At length, Pharaoh appointed Joseph to rule over all of Egypt. When a severe famine gripped the entire region, guess who came to Egypt begging for food. None other than Joseph's brothers, who of course did not recognize him. But Joseph immediately recognized them, and after having a little fun with them, disclosed his identity and chose to love them. How easy, how perfectly natural it would have been for Joseph to hate – to render evil to those who had rendered evil to him. Instead, he chose to forgive them.

In today's reading, Joseph shines forth with the brightness of God's love, suggesting that here is life the way God means us to live it. So listen well, all who dare to call themselves Christian – listen well: when such people as Joseph's brothers appear in your life or mine, we have one, and only one, course of action open to us. We are to find a way to love them. Period. The Christian faith rules out any act of vengeance. The minute we allow ourselves to dwell on thoughts of retaliation, to say nothing of acting on them, we invite hatred to lodge in our hearts, and we part company with Jesus. The only way out of the hell of hatred is to love your enemies.

Do you find these words of Jesus to be a tough pill to swallow? I certainly do. We object for any number of sound and seemingly logical reasons. Love and forgiveness extended to the unrighteous isn't fair. They don't deserve it. We fear that blessing those who curse us will send the wrong message to society, and encourage only more of their bad behavior. We have too little time as it is with the people we love. Why should we spend one minute of such a valuable commodity doing good things for those who hate us? It doesn't make sense. Let's be honest: we just don't want to love our enemies. And if we did, we wouldn't know how. These words of Jesus are a mystery. Try as we might, we just cannot manufacture a single loving feeling for the people who have hurt or threatened us. And so we fight on.

I confess that a TV show on the History Channel that I've taken to watching – largely because I have two teenaged sons – is called "Knight Fight" (knight with a "k" as in a knight in shining armor). The gist of the show is that people who enjoy historic weaponry and fighting clad themselves in authentic medieval armor. They arm themselves with medieval clubs, swords, and axes and prepare to do battle in a ring. The moderator of the show is a former WWE wrestler. He reads them the rules, then with a grimace and a clenched fist says, "Ready: FIGHT!" The knights go at each other with reckless abandon until the panel of judges determines a champion. Every show begins with a warning that what you are about to see is dangerous. "Do not try this on your own." Nevertheless we do – perhaps not with medieval armor, and hopefully not with actual blows. But the temptation in heart and mind to fight those who fight us, and hate those who hate us is a natural impulse that is hard to overcome. "Ready, FIGHT!" is an easy command to obey. Such fun, we think. By contrast, Jesus sounds like an absolute curmudgeon when he says, "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*"

Are you ready to work with me for a moment? Let's try to understand what Jesus might have meant when he issued this most-difficult invitation. The original Greek language of the New Testament includes at least four different words that describe various types of love. Unfortunately, we seem to have just the one English word, love, that in translation covers all the Greek words. One of these Greek words is key. When Jesus said "love your enemies," the word that Luke recorded was *agape* (pronounced "ah-gah'-pay"). While the other Greek words for love describe spontaneous emotions of the heart, *agape* refers to a determination of the will, or an attitude of the mind. *Agape* is love as a practice, love as a policy, love as a habit, even love as a discipline. As such, *agape* lacks the passion, the warmth, and the affection of the other words for love. Thus, the

main New Testament word for love is not a soft, unpredictable emotion that rises and falls due to outward circumstances. *Agape* is a steady, willful, determination to wish for and to work for what is the best for another person – no matter how you happen to feel about that person on this or that day, no matter what harm that person may have caused. This, says Jesus, is the love that makes us children of the Most High. It is the love that God has for us, and it is the love that Jesus invites us to extend toward our enemies.

To me, it's good news that *agape* is the Christian word for love. It is good news because it means that God looks on us with a steady, determined, willful *agape*. It is also good news because I can work on *agape*. I can work on being consistently of good will to all people, regardless of their offense. When Jesus commands us to have *agape* for our enemies, he is not asking the impossible. He is not telling us to conjure up warm feelings that are not naturally within us. He is not commanding us to like people who hate us. He is not demanding that we enjoy the company of people we find rude or disagreeable. He is not ordering us to have affection for people who have been hurtful or abusive. You cannot command your emotions. But you can work on *agape*. All of us can practice being kind to those who are mean.

Even still, it seems like a stretch, doesn't it? How can we begin? Jesus told us how when he said, *pray for those who abuse you*. Are you in conflict with another person? Are you held in the grip of anger and hatred? Do you quietly wish ill upon someone else? If so, let me suggest this: Go into your room, close the door, kneel at your bed, and pray for that person you have dared to call an enemy. Bring that person to mind and pray for him or her every day. Mind you, now, don't pray for that person to come around to your point of view, and see how wrong he or she is. Don't pray for an increase in your ability to forgive the miserable wretch. Don't even pray about the issue that divides you. Such prayers do more to accentuate the rancor than alleviate it. Rather, pray for that person's happiness, peace, joy, success, and health. Pray that God would shower lavish blessings and all good things upon that person. Make it a daily discipline to pray for the well-being of your enemy. How long should you keep at these prayers? Pray them until you actually mean them (because at first you won't). Pray them until Christ leads you out of the hell of hatred. Pray them until God changes you. Remember, God's goal in all this is to change us into children of the Most High, to change us into the likeness of Christ.

And so, what do you think of Hoda Muthana? At yesterday's Unity House work day I fell into conversation with one of our Muslim partners about what he thought this young woman's fate should be. He had much to say. He lamented that Hoda Muthana and people like her make life infinitely more difficult for all Muslims in America who are trying to be good citizens and practice their religion in peace. Prejudice and hate will increase thanks to her. Her crimes are great.

Is she an enemy? Yes, unfortunately, she seems to have earned the title. Should we pray for her? Yes indeed, because Jesus invites us to do so. Should we find a way to cultivate *agape* for her in our minds and deeds? Yes again, because Jesus commands us to love our enemies. Does *agape* mean that she should be forgiven without bearing the full legal consequences of her offenses? No, cheap grace serves no one's well-being. Does *agape* align with her being left in a refugee camp where, most likely, she will be killed by the locals in retribution for being a member of ISIS? It's hard to imagine that such an outcome is anything Jesus would have in mind.

It's not my place to tell anyone what to think or what to do. I am neither a lawyer nor an expert in international affairs. But I would be derelict in my duties as a priest and a preacher if I did not point out the real world consequences of Jesus' words when he said, "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*"