

“Cheek-Turning and Other Christian Disciplines”

Luke 6:27-38

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Eighth Sunday after Epiphany, February 24, 2019
Matt Matthews

It may seem unseemly, but I'd like you to think about your enemies. I invite you to think about the people, the groups, the nations that you hate.

Yes, hate.

Hate isn't a great word? We might have learned in Sunday school that Christians aren't supposed to hate. That is a good teaching and a true teaching, but we do. We do hate.

The Psalmist hated.

Do you know Psalm 139? It's the Psalm that talks about wherever we are, God knows us, sees us, lovingly cares for us. It begins thusly, "*O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up...*" At verse 19, this lovely Psalm seems to go off the tracks. "*O that you would kill the wicked, O God.*" And it gets worse:

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with perfect hatred;

Thank goodness for the honesty of the Psalms. The Psalmist expresses whatever she really feels, whether those feelings are polite or not. She feels worry, love, fear, boiling hot anger, confusion, forsakenness, hatred—even *perfect* hatred.

Who do you hate?

Some of us hate political adversaries. Some of us “hate” our president. Some of us “hate” our governor. Some of us “hate” the person who embarrassed us in front of our peers. Some of us “hate” the ex-boss, the ex-spouse, the ex-con, the ex-friend. Hate may be too strong a word.

Or not.

Christopher Capozziello hates the cerebral palsy that mercilessly tortures his twin brother. He explores that in his film *The Distance Between Us*, and he'll talk about it next Sunday in our *Faith in the Real World* Sunday school class.

Who do you hate?

The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that the number of hate groups in the country is rising. One thousand twenty (1,020) such groups were counted in 2018, a 7-percent rise from last year, reflecting what Heidi Beirich of the Center calls an “enlivened American hate movement.”

Who do you hate? Scoot over and allow space on your pew for your enemy to sit with you for a moment.

* * *

When the minister of my home church preached this passage about praying for and loving your enemy, my pastor did an amazing thing. He said if you are serious about praying for and loving your enemy, you’ll take seriously praying for and loving him: then he held up the front page of the Daily-Press that showed a picture of somebody in the news who had done a horrible thing. I was a kid. I didn’t know the person on the front page of The Daily Press. But I remember that some in the congregation looked away. My father sitting next to me stiffened.

Rev. Andrew’s point couldn’t be sharper: If you’re serious about following Jesus’ injunction to pray for and love your neighbor, you will pray for and love this man.

* * *

Who do you hate?

I guess that what Jesus is getting at in this text is that if we pray for our enemies, if we dare to treat our enemies humanely (even if they haven’t treated us humanely), if we bless them, and if pray for them, our hatred for them may be replaced by an awareness that we’re all broken—some more than others—and all sinners are all capable of doing horrible things, and if the circumstances were different (circumstances like growing up abused in poverty or with mental illness) that horrible behavior might have been our own, and, even, “there but the grace of God go I.”

Honestly, I’m not positive what Jesus is getting at. Maybe if we pray for the bully, we begin to see that the bully was once bullied, the abuser was once abused, the person who breaks is also badly broken. This doesn’t mean we approve of their actions. It doesn’t mean that justice doesn’t hold them accountable. It doesn’t mean we even have to “like” them. But, it would appear, we are called by Jesus to love them. And loving our enemy means treating them with the respect with which we want to be treated.

It helps me to know that the one who issues this challenge is the one who probably knew his enemies would one day nail him to a cross.

* * *

When Rev Andrews' son, Andy, went to Nicaragua in the early 1980s, the peacemaking delegation of which he was a part went to a village where someone had blown up a small school house, killing a teacher. Andy's group joined a group of villagers who carried a large cross to place on the top of the hill overlooking the school house. The man next to him was the dead teacher's husband.

Andy asked, aren't you angry? "Yes," the man said.

"Don't you hate the person who did this?"

The man stopped and looked at Andy. "No, I do not. *When the hate comes in, the Christ goes out.*"

* * *

²⁷"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bles those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

May God help us not only help us to understand this word, but to live it. AMEN.