

**Wildwood Mennonite Church**  
**February 24, 2019**  
**Love your Enemies**  
**Matthew 5:43-48**

Good morning. It is good to be back in this familiar place again, with such wonderful friends and to see some smiling faces out there.

I have listened to and/or read some of the previous sermons in this series and so I am well aware that previous speakers have given a very good grounding in the context of Jewish thought and religion at the time of Jesus' life and also in earlier Jewish contexts and thinking. So, I will not repeat what has already been said... I hope. In looking at this text for today on Loving your Enemies, I found it very difficult to separate it from the previous verses on guarding against retaliation. Forgive me if some of what I say is along the same lines as Eileen's sermon last week.

You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor – but hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for your persecutors." As others speakers have noted, Jesus' purpose here is not to abolish previous laws and instructions but rather to enhance them, to build upon them, or perhaps more accurately, to update them. But before we go further we need to look back in the Hebrews scriptures to see just what Jesus was quoting. Leviticus 19:17-18 says

"Do not bear a grudge against others, but settle your differences with them, so that you will not commit a sin because of them. Do not take revenge on others or continue to hate them, but love your neighbors as you love yourself. I am the Lord."

Where does it say that God's people are to hate their enemies? No where in this text. So where did this idea come from? Well in Greek thought, you were mature when you had learned to treat your friend right but take revenge on anyone who had done evil toward you. This idea of taking revenge or at the very least, disliking or hating your enemy was also prevalent in some Hebrew scriptures. Deuteronomy 30 speaks of God putting curses on enemies and adversaries who took advantage of the Israelites. God spoke through Jeremiah saying that he had punished the Israelites and treated them like an enemy because their sins were many and their wickedness great. But God would restore Israel and "all who devour you will be devoured, and all your enemies will be taken away as prisoners. All who oppress you will be oppressed, and all who plunder you will be plundered." (Jer. 30:16). And in Psalm 139:21-22, the Psalmist says "O Lord, how I hate those who hate you! How I despise those who rebel against you! I hate them with a total hatred; I regard them as my enemies." It appears that hatred is almost

a natural response of humanity. But God did not command humanity to hate their enemy.

Some scholars believe these verses about loving the enemy are irrelevant for us on this side of heaven. They would argue that our world is far more complicated than Jesus' world was and that it really isn't even possible to operate on the basis of love. Jesus didn't have to deal with Huawei and the possibility of China shutting down our computer systems, power grids, and so on. Isis is still alive and well, firing attacks on numerous cities and countries. How are we to respond in love to these enemies? What good would it do? We often forget that Jesus' world was not that much different from ours. He lived in an occupied country. Rome held Israel under its' heavily militarized thumb. The Roman government burdened the people with enormous taxes. They demanded allegiance to Caesar. Death was the penalty for allegiance to any other God. Yet even in that environment Jesus restated the command, "I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus introduced the idea of returning a soft answer to wrath, a blessing for a curse and to pray for the one who treats you spitefully. He declared that the curse no longer has a place in the life of a follower of Jesus.

Jesus turned "eye for an eye" thinking, that deep human desire for revenge, on its' head. If we love our friends and family but hate our enemies, we are no different from any other person. How can we be salt and light in this world as followers of Jesus if we are just like everyone else? Richard Rohr, Catholic priest, teacher and writer, asks us to imagine what the world would be like if we as Christians actually lived up to Jesus' command to love our enemies. Probably very few, if any of us, actually are able to truly fulfill this command, but as followers of Jesus, we all should be well practiced in loving our enemies.

Who constitutes an enemy? Are we to understand this command in a national or political sense or in a personal way? Is my enemy the person who does me wrong? Is he or she the one with whom I simply don't get along? Is it a specific race of people or a group of people who subscribe to a religious or political persuasion that I dislike? I'm going to leave this question open-ended for us all to ponder. And what did Jesus really mean when he commanded us to LOVE our enemy? What kind of love? When we speak about loving our enemies in a secular or national context most people would respond that love is unable to effect change in the face of real violence and injustice. They see love as the mushy gushy kind of feeling that is often advertised on Valentine's Day. But I don't for a second believe this is what Jesus was speaking about. Real love demands courage. It demands creativity. It demands integrity.

Walter Wink interprets the verses about turning the other cheek, giving one's inner coat as well as the outer coat, and carrying a master's load a second mile as a means to assert one's human dignity and take back the power of choice when one is in a position of servitude that cannot be changed at the moment.<sup>1</sup> Loving the enemy may mean taking a creative approach to disarming or surprising one's enemy. It may also mean showing tough love, that is not letting the person get away with harmful actions, but also choosing not to avenge the violence oneself.

What does it mean to love our enemy when we are speaking of the #Me Too movement? Or in Theatre of the Beat's words, the #Church Too movement? Or when we are a battered spouse? How do we love our enemy when he or she is our abuser? Jesus did not purport a love that is sentimental or soft. Jesus commanded a strong love. When the Pharisees threatened to stone the adulterous woman, Jesus stood between them and challenged them, "He who is without sin be the first to cast a stone." Jesus is not asking us to be doormats, to let injustices go unaccounted for. Loving our enemies will call them to account so that they can make restitution for their crimes. Reproving the enemy is an important aspect of love, however, one must be careful that our reproof does not become persecution or violence against the enemy. It must not turn the abuser into the abused. Love in situations such as #Me Too is a challenge more in line with Walter Wink's understanding of turning the other cheek or walking a second mile.

I don't know about you but I find myself treating Trump as my enemy. I find it very difficult to a man who lies whenever it is convenient so that he looks good publicly. I find it hard to love a man who demonizes immigrants wanting to enter the US in order to make a better life for themselves or who refers to immigrants as terrorists. What does it mean to love him? Or to bring it closer to home, how do we demonstrate our love to First Nations People when we continue to live on the land that was stolen from them? What does it mean to love them as we love ourselves? We may not think we see them as our enemy but perhaps we actually do, if we think our land and our way of life, our laws, our economic security might be in jeopardy. Are we willing to donate significant monies to the Jubilee Fund, a project of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Central Committee Canada that attempts to address in a small way the imbalance of wealth and power between people of Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) descent and Canada's settler population? Are we willing to give back or sell at a reduced cost some of our land to them? How can we love the one from whom we stole? Loving our enemies means addressing injustices in our world. It means taking away the stigma

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<sup>1</sup> "Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way", Walter Wink, pp. 104-112, in The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament, Ed. Willard Swartley. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky. 1992.

that is attached to some peoples or some conditions. The Samaritan loved his enemy when he stopped by the side of the road to help a Jewish traveler at a time when it was unheard of for Samaritans and Jews to associate with one another.

Loving our enemy must be done without any thoughts of revenge or hatred. It must be done in a spirit of humility, compassion, and a willingness and eagerness to forgive. It demands that we be willing to pray a blessing on that person or group of people.

Years ago I had an employer who was not well suited to the job. He simply didn't know how to operate as the CEO of the organization. He was reluctant to make any decisions and was ineffective in mentoring his staff. I became increasingly resentful toward him because he was unable to provide direction for the organization. I was very reluctant to help him make the decisions that he should have been making on his own as the CEO. I stewed. I inwardly complained. My dislike and disrespect for him grew. I soon realized that I had made him my enemy. When I sought counsel from a friend as to how to deal with my negative attitude towards him, he suggested that I pray for him, the exact advice Jesus gave. Praying for your enemy does not change the other person. It changes you. It demanded of me to put aside my own feelings of anger and disrespect. In their place I was asked to pray that God would bless him, would lead and guide him in his role. As I prayed for this man, my attitude did slowly change. He did not all of a sudden become competent, but I had become just a bit more lenient in my criticism. I started to trust that the powers that be would eventually make the changes that were needed in the organization.

Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch watchmaker in the Netherlands. She had grown up in a devout Christian home and when Germany invaded the Netherlands, the Ten Boom home became a refuge for hundreds of Jews trying to escape death at the hands of the Nazis. Eventually their home was raided and her entire family was taken to concentration camps. As for the ten Booms, they suffered greatly in prison. Corrie's father, who was 84, died less than two weeks in custody. Corrie's brother ended up contracting tuberculosis and died a short time after the war. For 10 months, Corrie and her sister Betsie were transferred to various prisons and stayed busy sharing their Christian faith. However, Betsie's health failed, and she died in December 1944. Just two weeks later Corrie, 52, was released from prison due to a clerical error. She would find out a week later that the rest of the women in her age group were executed. She always wondered what she would do, how she would respond, if she ever met the prison guard who had tormented her and her sister. That opportunity came one day in 1947. In an excerpt from her autobiography *The Hiding Place* (1971), she described the chance meeting.

*It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives . . . And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man.*

Corrie continued describing her experience. The former guard walked up to her and told her he had become a Christian after the war. He did not recognize her, but he reached his hand out and surprised her by asking for her forgiveness... *And I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and could not. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?*

But Corrie said she knew what she had to do. She had to forgive him, even though her emotions were fighting against it.

*And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion — I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.*

After silently praying for what felt like an eternity, Corrie grabbed his hand. With tears in her eyes, she forgave him and called him "brother."

*For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.<sup>2</sup>*

In that moment of taking her former guard's hand and calling him brother, Corrie Ten Boom was able to rise above her hatred, her desire for revenge and enlarge the love she had for not only this man but also for everyone and everything else in the world. Richard Rohr says that to arise to this higher level of consciousness, where our heart is enlarged in love, is only possible with the help of the Holy Spirit. When we withhold love, when we refuse to love, it is only ourselves we are hurting and limiting. Until we call on this larger Love to work within us, that same love that Jesus has through his Abba, we will never truly be able to love our enemies. We need this kind of conversion, this kind of transformation in our own hearts and lives. Without this transformative love, we are but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13. If our love is no greater than a tax collector's love, then we have not yet become children of God. And that is the goal right, to become children of God? Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.biography.com/news/corrie-ten-boom-story-quotes>

Father in heaven.” (vs44-45a). As Richard Rohr says, we have not yet become children of God if our hearts have not been enlarged by God’s love, the kind of love that loves even our enemies.<sup>3</sup> As we draw a close to this series on the sermon on the mount, may the Holy Spirit burrow her way into our hearts and minds. May she transform and enlarge our hearts, so that everyone around us will see that we have and we are becoming the children of God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cac.org/love-of-enemies/>