

“Love Your Enemies”
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April 26, 2009
First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware

Story for All Ages

When I was growing up, I lived across the street from a girl named Shelly Martin. She was my friend. Sort of. We played a lot together, but Shelly was kind of mean – sometimes I wasn’t exactly sure she was my friend. Sometimes she would make fun of my clothes, or say mean things about me to other people. I would come home crying.

One day, I went over to Shelly’s house after school. I knocked on her door, and she came outside, and said, “My cousins are here. You can’t play with us. We’re having a party.” I don’t know quite what happened inside me, maybe it was just that ha-ha-*ha* look on her face, but I took my lunch bucket and hit Shelly over the head. My metal lunch bucket.

Then a strange thing happened. Shelly started crying. I had never seen her cry. I didn’t know what to do, so I ran home. For about a minute, it felt kind of... good. All those times she had made me cry. And then it felt really bad. I realized I didn’t want to hit anybody again. I thought there had to be better ways of standing up to Shelly than hitting her over the head. There were good things about her, too – like the time my mom was in the hospital and she had a birthday party for me. In our church, we teach that no one is all good, and no one is all bad, and so you have to treat everyone with worth and dignity – and no one deserves to be hit.

Readings

Matthew 5:43-47

Singing the Living Tradition #584 “A Network of Mutuality” by Martin Luther King

Sermon

I really did hit Shelly Martin over the head with my lunchbox. It's true. In that moment, she had become my enemy. I succumbed to an ancient, powerful, human logic: “You hurt me and I'm going to hurt you.” We *know* that this just activates more hurt, more retaliation. But the impulse is strong. Religion has tried for centuries to steer us away from this. People have been critical of the Hebrew Bible's instruction, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” What they don’t know is that this was actually an improvement over what people had been practicing – a *life* for an eye. A *head* for a tooth. A whole *family* for a life. You must limit the punishment, the rabbis said, and somehow make it proportionate to the crime. But there were also passages in the Hebrew scriptures that pointed out the love of God for all people, not just the righteous or those whom we judge to be good. “Thou openest thy hand,” said the Psalmist to God, “thou satisfiest the desire of *every living thing*.” Not just the people we happen to think deserve it.

So Jesus was not the first rabbi to teach this notion of loving your enemy. But in preaching to an occupied and despised people under the thumb of the Romans, his words would have startled them, just the same. The Romans kept the Jews in dire poverty and took their land, their wealth. They punished people brutally. Crucifixion was not invented for Jesus; the sight of people on crosses would have been familiar. They would not have thought Jesus' teaching was at all reasonable. Or desirable.

Are you saying to just let them hurt us? Are you saying that it's okay what they do to us? Jesus wasn't teaching them to capitulate, to agree and cooperate with an unjust system. He wanted people to resist. He was telling them, though, that they couldn't get anywhere if they gave in to hate. He was telling them to keep their humanity intact. And the only way to do this in his view was to love the enemy.

Jesus' teachings are hard to follow. I think especially of the Palestinian Christians we met on our travels to the Holy Land, the ones who, ironically, would most resemble the oppressed Jews of Jesus' time. What did they think of this teaching? Did they struggle with it? Some were remarkably open people, who had Israelis for friends, even in the midst of their anger. Some were not. But few people, in all times and places, have come anywhere near following it.

Martin Luther King admitted that this teaching was hard, but he preached love of enemies to his congregation. They were oppressed by the legacies of slavery and the very current violence and poverty in their lives. His sermon "Loving Your Enemies" counseled blacks to love the whites who were oppressing them. I marvel at anyone having the conviction – the nerve – to tell an oppressed people to love those that so clearly and forcefully hated them. But he said, "This command of Jesus challenges us with new urgency. Upheaval after upheaval has reminded us that modern man is traveling along a road called hate, in a journey that will bring us to destruction and damnation. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival." (*Strength to Love*, pp. 49-50)

Different from the preachers that plantation owners brought in to convert their slaves to Christianity, this was not a message to, "Slaves, obey your masters." He was not telling them to capitulate to segregation. He preached this sermon in the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. "We will not obey your unjust laws," he said. "We will hate segregation, but love the segregationist."

These words could only make sense coming from someone like King himself, who had actually lived them. Someone who had to learn to survive threats and jail and being met with constant hatred, himself. If he were not to become subsumed by hatred, he had to find a way beyond wanting to hate in return.

In our time, the Dalai Lama, one of the most respected and beloved spiritual leaders does not teach the Tibetans to hate the Chinese. Even though the Chinese government has exiled him, and is brutally oppressing the Tibetan people. You just know in listening to him that he does not hate them. He's done away with the desire to hurt his enemies.

We all have enemies. We all have people who have hurt us in some way. Sometimes our enemies are personal. A cheating spouse – someone who left us - or the enemy is the one for whom we have been left. The bitterness that surrounds divorce can be a powerful force to reckon with. People marvel at ex-spouses who are friendly with one another. A parent who abuses a child becomes an enemy. The damage done to the psyche of that child can be deep and painful – and inspire a lifelong bitterness toward the parent.

And if we are in a situation like this, we feel that to let go of the bitterness, and to forgive somehow lets the one who hurt us off the hook and excuses what they have done to us. We think it diminishes our power and makes us vulnerable to more hurt. Or sometimes we would absolutely let go

of the anger and bitterness if we could, but it feels too big, somehow; it won't let us go, even if we want to let go of it. And I could not preach one word to you about forgiveness if I had not personally felt the power of forgiveness in my own life. The release in forgiving someone who abused me in childhood. I know people who have experienced the miracle of forgiving their parents, and who have stopped the cycle of abuse from continuing with their own children. And that's a miracle. Loving your personal enemy does not mean continuing to let them hurt you. It does mean releasing them and you from the bondage of the hurt. By forgiving them what they have done.

Sometimes it's a whole group of people, who have harmed or wish to harm us. People who don't even know us and hate us. I was driving to a meeting a few months ago, driving down the back streets in Fairfax to Aldersgate Church. I was stopped at a stop sign. And when I pulled forward, the car behind me started blaring his horn. Not just a quick toot out of frustration or to get my attention, I mean really pounding his horn. I looked behind me, and it was a battered pick-up. The driver was now not only pounding his horn, but giving me the finger. Over and over again. I wondered what I had done. (I'm a nice Midwestern girl; we always think it's our fault.) Couldn't figure it out. He just kept pounding and jabbing his middle finger – while turning, by the way, which was an accomplishment. Then I remembered my bumper sticker. “We support the freedom to marry. Unitarian Universalists standing on the side of love.” There was a rainbow in case you didn't get the point.

I didn't feel threatened. It was a bright Saturday morning, plenty of other people around. I wasn't hurt. But it took my breath away. I had an enemy.

Last fall, the UU church in Knoxville, Tennessee, experienced a shooting, by a man who had divorced one of their members. But he enlarged his rage to include the community she loved, and then to include all religious liberals. Sometimes just by being yourself – you draw enemies to yourself. It is part of being vocal about who you are and what you stand for. A friend of mine once had a counselor say to him, “I'll bet you don't have an enemy in the world.” My friend said, with some pride, “No, I don't guess I do.” The counselor said, “It's not a compliment.” If you're really going to be yourself, if you're going to stand up for what you believe in, someone is going to not like you. Sometimes hate you.

Notice that the teaching is not “Avoid ever having an enemy,” or “Make sure everyone really likes you.” You can't have a church or even a bumper sticker that openly supports gays and lesbians if you're trying to live up to that one. No, the teaching is “love your enemies,” and so it assumes that you will have them.

Some enemies come about through no action of ours, direct or indirect. I have heard – and personally felt - much rage toward the people who engineered the subprime mortgage deals. Those who could read the signs of economic destruction from the beginning and said nothing. Those who then sliced the loans up into different bundles that ended up infecting the world's economy and causing millions of people to lose their investments, their jobs, their homes. People who made their fortunes from other people's misery. If you were alone in a room with Bernie Madoff, say, and you had a lunch bucket, what would you do? What would you tell some well-meaning preacher who told you to love them? This is a hard teaching.

The notion of extending compassion to someone who is more powerful than ourselves is a disturbing one. When we think of compassion, we think of it in terms of the “less fortunate”. But an

enemy is always someone whom we allow to have power over us. And if we are to expend our energy in blame and hate, lose more than our wallets. We will give up our humanity. We will give away more power. We must somehow learn to love these enemies, too.

What exactly does it mean to *love* your enemy? There are three Greek words in the gospels that can be translated as “love”: *Eros*, *Philiias* and *Agape*. *Eros* is romantic love, that yearning, that baby-I-can't-live-without- you kind of love that is delicious and not very long-lasting. It wouldn't be very practical to advise this sort of love when it comes to an enemy. But *eros* is not the word being used here.

Philiias is also found in the Bible, meaning a love of people who love you, or those whom you find appealing. With *philiias*, you can expect something from the other person. There is some reward for your loving them, some mutual relationship. There is some relief that the teaching doesn't use that word, doesn't suggest this kind of love. Martin Luther King said we should be grateful that Jesus did not tell us to “*like* our enemies”. Much harder, in his opinion, than love.

The word used in our text is *agape*, which is an unconditional love. It is the way that God loves, if you like, or it is simply compassion itself. It's the kind of love we mean when we talk about affirming the “inherent worth and dignity of all people”. It's the kind of love our Universalist ancestors had in mind when they preached about universal salvation – that no one is beyond the pale, no one is beyond redemption or forgiveness, no one may be so judged that we feel free to castigate them to hell. But *agape* is also a love so powerful that it is not something we can quite accomplish on our own, that is, simply by sitting down and making ourselves do it. We need help. We need to learn how. We need to be transformed somehow.

So if *agape* is the word, and it means loving as God loves, if it means compassion no matter what, how on earth do you get there?

First, loving our enemy simply means, to begin with, not killing them. And that's good! Also not easy to pull off. The death penalty is still legal in this country, and still has a certain amount of popular support. Pacifism is so far only completely agreed upon by a few religions – the Quakers, the Disciples of Christ and some strands of Buddhism. Vegetarians are a small minority. But there is power in staking a claim to not killing. No matter how few.

Loving our enemy also means not hating them. King taught that the most powerful reason to love one's enemy is that hate only begets more hate. And we have to let go of that. It means giving up that perverse satisfaction we feel when we cleverly insult them to our friends. It means realizing that there is more to someone than the evil they have done. There is more to this human being than “the thing that hurts” me. No one is all good or all evil.

Loving your enemy means learning how to forgive them for what they've done to you. Not for their sake, but for your own. Not because they are sufficiently sorry, or have changed enough in character, or somehow show that they deserve it. You forgive so that you do not have to live in the grip of bitterness, yourself. Terry Anderson, the journalist who had been kidnapped by Hezbollah in the mid-1980s, regularly spoke to people afterwards about the freedom he found in forgiving his torturers. It's hard to imagine finding that within yourself, and yet when he did, he said, it set him free.

Loving our enemy goes further, though. It means trying to understand how the person feels. I was having coffee with Scott shortly after the incident where the man was blasting his horn and giving me the finger. Scott said, “Imagine someone carrying that much hate around. That must be really painful.” And I thought differently about the man. I was a little less pleased with myself for being such a good, outspoken UU, and a little more concerned about someone else's life. Curious. Sometimes when we can't shake a feeling, like fear, or anger – it is helpful to be curious, to wonder about something. What is it like to be him? It is a beginning.

Loving your enemy means wanting the good for them. Jesus instructed his followers to “pray for those who persecute you”. I have found praying for someone I'm really mad at does do something – for me. Buddhist meditation includes the practice of *metta*, which is intensely desiring the good for all people. Including the ones who hurt you. When I'm stuck on loving someone when I don't feel all warm and fuzzy about them, I think about wanting the good for them. Happiness. Prosperity. Joy. Something you might not sincerely feel in the moment. I have experienced a shift in myself in saying these words – *before I mean them*. I know a Southern preacher who counseled saying this prayer: “God BLESS that rotten jerk, Lord, because I sure can't.” Believe it or not, it helps.

Loving our enemy is hard. How do people do it? How have any of our great heroes done it? Some have attributed it to their faith in God, or to their sense of Christ within them. But there are many who don't believe in God, or who aren't Christian who are powerful examples of forgiveness. The Dalai Lama with the Chinese, Thich Nhat Hanh with the Viet Cong. It is clear both the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have been released from their hatred.

People, I think, attribute some kind of supernatural spiritual power to these spiritual leaders. We call it faith, and decide that some just have it and others don't. Or we think of faith as being some kind of magical something that whooshes over us, filling us with peace and trust and certainty about the goodness of others. I remember the film “Dead Man Walking,” based on the experiences of Sister Helen Prejean, who counseled a death row inmate before his execution. At the end of the film, she encounters the father of one of the two teenagers who had been murdered by the man she had been counseling. He says to her, “I wish I had your faith, Sister.” She stares at him for a moment, and says, “It's not faith. It's work. I have to work at this every day.”

Loving your enemy means knowing, really knowing how little someone else can truly hurt you. The safer you feel in your own skin, the less of a threat someone else can be. It means being able to put aside your ego, your need to be right, and know you will not disappear. This is not a condition that comes without work. It doesn't come by snapping your fingers or by willing it to happen, but in doing honest, deep, soul-searching work on yourself. Therapy. Twelve step work. Spiritual practice. Time and patience. Ordinary work. The work of a human being.

We are not aiming to become saints, to become divine. Walter Wink wrote, “I do not know what the word 'divine' signifies. But I do have an inkling of what the word 'human' might entail,... and there have been exemplary human beings, in [all religious] traditions. We are not required to become divine... flawless, perfect, without blemish. We are invited simply to become human.” (Walter Wink, *The Human Being*)

How do we love our enemy? Imperfectly. In speaking to an audience, the Dalai Lama once said, “I wonder why people like me so much.” Try to imagine any other spiritual leader saying this.

Only someone as completely humble as the Dalai Lama could say it so sincerely. “I wonder why people like me,” he said. “I think it is because I like Boddhichita so much.” In the Mahayana tradition, Bodhichitta means the union of compassion and wisdom. And the practitioner works on the good of all beings as if it were his own. But notice that he doesn't say how good he is at Bodhichitta, or that he has somehow mastered compassion. He just says that he likes it. I interpret this to mean just that he cares about caring. It's not always possible to feel compassion, to feel the love we believe in. But if the Dalai Lama is correct, sincerely caring about caring is a practice all by itself.

How do we love our enemy? By caring about caring. By looking at how people around us do it. If you look at the article outside our office door, you can read how the Knoxville UU church has experienced healing. They have refused to shut their doors in fear. They have insisted on welcoming everyone – even now, especially now. And as they mourn the two members they lost and tend to the still-fresh wounds of their community, this welcome must not be an easy thing to offer. Their felt sense of compassion for the shooter must be spotty sometimes. But, they believe, if they are going to be Unitarian Universalists with their lives and their hearts and not just their words, they must care about caring. Even when they don't feel like it.

These are not easy times. A sense of scarcity can invite us to fear, to close down on ourselves and to think only about survival. But ask Dr. King reminds us, our survival depends on each other. And on our open hearts. So may it be. Amen.