

How Can We Love Our Enemies?

Friends in faith – together on our live stream and in this house of worship on land loved by First Nations and others before us, loved by us now, and we hope loved into the future – let us consider together this morning: How can we love our enemies? I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a moment of prayer.

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of being freely gathered for worship today. Creator, Revealer, and Sustainer: infuse us with your wisdom and grace. Expand our capacity to love until we see and honor you in each of our enemies, each stranger with whom we cross paths, and within ourselves. We pray as followers of Jesus. Amen.

Friends, long-time and newer, we arrive to this moment on the seventh Sunday after Epiphany. During this season in the church year, we meditate on the loving light that Jesus shone in the world and wonder how we might more effectively follow his lead, shining that same light through our living. In the context of preaching, I sometimes remind us that we are each created and sustained by the fathomless love that is God. Given today's gospel reading, I also encourage us to recognize that those we experience as enemy or stranger are also each created and sustained by the God's fathomless love.

I wonder: do you recognize your own humanity in the faces of others and hold space for them to reflect your humanity back to you? My theology and anthropology (that means my ways of conceptualizing and talking about God and my way of conceptualizing about people) have been tremendously influenced by words from my Grandma Liza, which she spoke a few weeks before her death in 2008.

She was a very active 87-year old woman when her doctor found metastasized ovarian cancer and Grandma Liza chose to not pursue any medical interventions. *“See yourself in everyone.”* She spoke these words in response to a loved one at her bedside who was expressing frustration about an elected official of a political persuasion not their own. *“See yourself in everyone.”* Because of her deeply rooted Christian faith, I sense that Grandma Liza believed we will see ourselves in everyone if we recognize and honor God’s divine love in ourself, in the other, and in the connection between us. She invites us into Jesus’ profound and relentless call to love others.

I recently paged through Grandma Liza’s memoirs, which she wrote in her later 80s and which I had the privilege to help edit. I found these faithful, hopeful words: *“When God made each soul unique, He pretty much ensured the multiplicity of religions. I am reasonably sure He is also having a hand in the coming together in understanding and mutual respect of the leaders and many followers in the world’s major religions.”* Nurtured in the Episcopal tradition and a practitioner of Buddhist transcendental meditation as well as a form of centering prayer developed by Roman Catholic monk, Father Thomas Keating; Grandma Liza (from 1920 to 2008) found grounding in her identity within the Christian story while also recognizing the beauty and truth people express from within other traditions. *“See yourself in everyone.”*

As we explore the Jesus’ sermon as remembered in the gospel of Luke and a lyric from Paul Demer’s “Love For Enemies,” we will hear encouragement for how to find our way toward deeper empathy. In the reading from Luke, Jesus seems to lay out his code of ethics – his guiding principles for interacting with other humans.

He focuses particularly on attitudes and actions toward the enemy and toward the stranger. Let's hear again Jesus' advice boiled down to the attitudes and actions he implores us to adopt:

“Love... Do good... bless... Do to others as you would have them do to you... lend... Be merciful... Do not judge... Do not condemn... Forgive... Give...”

At first glance, this teaching by Jesus seems to be specifically about expressing and demonstrating love toward the other. However, his bold instructions for living a God-centered life can also remind us about his steady call to self-compassion. As disciples of Jesus, we worship a God whose love reminds us that every one of us is created and sustained by God – the source of love. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor as ourself – to honor God's imprint within ourself as well as within each person with whom we cross paths.

So let's explore Jesus' teaching about love toward enemy and toward stranger with an openness to also learning to love ourselves with the depth of Jesus' love. In order to mine the treasure trove of Jesus' words in today's gospel reading and to make a bit of sense out of them, I have done some rearranging and regrouping of what he had to say.

In regard to enemies, Jesus said, *“Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt... do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven...”*

I wonder, who is one of your enemies? Meaning, who do you experience to be against you? Or who do you experience as an enemy to someone you already love?

How do we show love to those who seem to be against us?

The original Greek work for “hate” in this passage carries a meaning of hostility. How do we do good to those who are hostile and emotionally closed off from us?

How do we find the grace to bless (that is, recognize the sacredness) in those who curse us or pray (that is, ask God’s loving presence to be felt) for those who mistreat us?

When someone strikes out at us or our loved one and we feel the sting of that slap, how do we find the courage and strength to keep facing toward the one who sought to wound?

If someone takes something from us, how do we find the generosity to let go of attachment to our assets?

How do we practice a way of not condemning a person, but rather critiquing (possibly even rejecting) behavior while staying open to deepening our understanding of the “why” behind the harmful behavior?

And finally, in terms of these enemies, how do we forgive? The Greek word for “forgive” in our scripture reading means to release, to let go. Jesus is reminding us of how we find release for ourselves when we forgive another – not letting an experience of hurt define the full relationship nor control our emotional health. Forgiveness often requires strong compassionate counsel. The one who has been harmed gets to choose if and when they are ready to forgive (release, let go) and whether or not it is a gift that they will share with the one who harmed them.

What does it feel like to interact directly with an enemy?

Often, our defenses rise and our hearts quicken nervously when confronting an enemy. I believe firmly that a powerful way to disarm our enemies is by speaking truth, even through tears and a shaking voice. Not unlike moment of extending forgiveness, moments of confrontation also need to be at the wounded person's initiation. We need to find space that is safe enough to bravely share our true experience of someone's actions toward us. The courage inherent in honest vulnerability is audacious in the best way possible. Honest, brave vulnerability can change a heart (or at least stop someone in their tracks of hurtful behavior) and sometimes lead to a big change. You can model for another how to **be honestly, bravely vulnerable.**

Now let's turn to wondering about those whom we experience as strangers – those other others. In this sermon, Jesus carries a sense of his connection with the love of God as a Father – as a loving parent. Jesus said, *“Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. Do to others as you would have them do to you... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?... Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

I wonder, who is a stranger to each of us? In other words, in whose story and experience have you not yet invested your attention and care to shift them in your mindset from stranger to neighbor or even friend?

And how might you bridge the divide such that a stranger becomes more someone with whom you honor your interdependence? Perhaps you and that stranger could each experience the image of God in one another.

In a moment we will hear Paul Demer sing his song, "Love For Enemies."
This is the verse that most captured my attention:

*"Then let us practice charity
And lay our judgement down
Till enemies are understood
And empathy is found"*

We often hear the word charity, but do we wonder about it? To practice charity is to practice generous goodwill or helpfulness toward others. Again, as Jesus asked, not expecting anything in return.

And empathy is really understanding and sensitivity toward another. As the lyrics of this song washed over me this week, I was reminded in a very strange way of a phrase from Martin Luther's explanation of the eight commandment. I had all of these explanations memorized as a grade school student.

In *Luther's Small Catechism*, the eight commandment is "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. What does this mean?" he asks. "We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way."

And that is phrase that came back to me this week – to think about our enemies and our strangers *"in the kindest possible way."*

From where do we draw strength to do this work of loving our enemies, of extending care to strangers? Jesus invites us deeper into our faith, where we can find the courage, with my Grandma Liza, to "see ourselves in everyone."

Let's trust God's love to empower us to love more generously – love ourselves more generously, our enemies, and strangers who could be friends – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
February 23, 2025 | 7th Sunday after Epiphany
Luke 6:27-38, "Love For Enemies"