

ELIMINATING OUR ENEMIES

Psalm 21:7-13, Matthew 5:43-48

September 21st, 2008

I was taught from an early age to love my enemies and to pray for those who persecuted me. That wasn't a popular lesson for the teachers or the students. When you have an enemy, you don't want to love them. You want to eliminate them. But we didn't have much choice. Jesus commanded it. We had to do it, whether we liked it or not.

Initially, I was much better at praying for my enemies than loving them. I prayed they'd leave me alone, or just leave. I prayed God would change their hearts and behavior. Vengeance might belong to the Lord, but I'd often suggest a target for some of that vengeance.

I especially liked Paul's take on loving your enemies. He said in Romans, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head." (Romans 12:20) I'm not exactly certain what Paul meant by that metaphor, but I liked the idea of pouring burning coals on the heads of my enemies.

As a child, teenager, and even a young adult, I had many enemies. Essentially, anyone who mistreated me in the slightest manner, who didn't do what I wanted them to do, and who threatened me in any way was my enemy. Persecution didn't require much.

So whenever I heard the admonition to pray for those who persecuted me, I knew I was going to be praying for awhile. As I matured, the list did get shorter. I discovered I had fewer enemies, but they tended to need more prayer. Whenever I heard Jesus' command, there was somebody to pray for.

Until last week.

Last week, I was listening to the radio when someone said that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. So being well trained, I did what I've always done and began to list my enemies. To my surprise, I couldn't think of anyone. While I'm certain there are still people who might identify me as an enemy, I realized last week that there is no one in my life right now that I consider an enemy.

I don't say this to brag or to lift myself up as some holy person. I'm as surprised as you are. Somehow, over time, the hate I once had for certain people has drained away. It's gone. I've forgiven the enemies of my past. I've created a life where I no longer see people as persecuting me. How did that happen?

I wish I could say I intentionally set out to become a man without enemies, but I didn't. It's something that has happened to me more than something I've done. Looking back, I can see pivotal moments in my life that have led to this freedom, but I can't pretend my experience is transferable.

I'm not even certain this is a permanent state. When I bragged to my son Zach about not having any enemies, he pointed out I live a remarkably hospitable and protected existence. He suggested if I'd lived through the genocide in Rwanda, I might find it more difficult to celebrate my freedom. He's right. I have not had anyone do great violence to me or someone I loved. The persecutions of my past have all been relatively mild. It is possible I have come to this place of having no enemies more out of good fortune than as a result of moral accomplishment.

On the other hand, having never been the target of great hostility, I have not had some great hate to overcome. As much as I am impressed with those who have forgiven great injury, I have no desire to be such a person. I am sympathetic to those still struggling with forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet, unburdened by such an effort, it has been easier for me to arrive at this place of peaceful co-existence.

I say easier because it has not been easy. Even eliminating the minor enemies of my life has been a battle. It didn't happen quickly. I resisted it at many points. However, there seem to be several important steps that have brought me to this place. This morning, I want to share my path, recognizing that every journey is different, but suspecting much of what I've had to overcome is common to the human condition.

Looking back, I can identify the first step in this journey. It was deciding to believe Jesus, to agree that his command to love our enemies was the best option.

It isn't the only option. Even Jesus knew that. Jesus said, "You have heard it said "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Where had his listeners heard this? From their religious leaders, from their heroes, in the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures were full of stories of Israel and her enemies. From Abraham to Jacob to Joseph to David, the stories were full of violence, of hostility, of eliminating enemies before they eliminated you. Often, God wasn't a neutral observer of such events. Israel's enemies were God's enemies.

The other passage we heard this morning, the 21st Psalm, is a good example of such thinking. Listen to its description of how God deals with God's enemies:

Your hand, O Lord, will lay hold on all your enemies; your right hand will seize your foes. At the time of your appearing you will make them like a fiery furnace. In his wrath the Lord will swallow them up, and his fire will consume them. You will destroy their descendents from the earth, their posterity from mankind.
Psalm 21: 8-11

In this Psalm, killing your enemies and their children is not considered a necessary evil, or a moral failing. It is portrayed as a divine attribute. Indeed, there is only one passage in all of the Hebrew Scriptures that suggests anything but hostility toward your enemies. Proverbs 16:7 says, “When a person’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, they make even their enemies live at peace with them.” But that is about as gracious as it gets. A fair reading of the Old Testament suggests killing your enemies is the best option. Indeed, it is often God’s command.

Before Jesus, they’re really wasn’t much choice. God’s people were commanded to destroy God’s enemies. Obviously, Jesus knew this. He’d read the 21st Psalm. He knew what he was suggesting was different – an alternative. He suggested we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He offered this option as a superior way of eliminating our enemies.

I think many miss this point. The choice is not between eliminating our enemies or loving them. The choice is by what means we’ll eliminate our enemies – violence or love.

Abraham Lincoln made that point toward the end of the Civil War. When it was obvious the South would soon surrender, Lincoln’s advisors gathered to decide what punishments they would lay on the Southern people for their rebellion. Many sought harsh retribution. Lincoln suggested a much more gracious approach. One advisor said, “We must destroy our enemies.” To which Lincoln responded, “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?”

Obviously, I wish Lincoln had said these words before the Civil War rather than at its end, but they still represent his realization that the violence of the war, while maintaining the political unity of the country, had no power to create friendships and renew affection.

Jesus – in commanding us to love our enemies – was offering an alternative to violence. He offered it because violence – while capable of eliminating our enemies – also creates more enemies. The friends and family of our enemies continue to hate us. The peace that violence brings is always temporary. If we don’t pay the price, our children will. Only love has the capacity of changing an enemy to a friend.

We all know that, even those who choose violence. We don't choose violence because it is the best option. We choose it because it provides instant gratification. The pain or threat created by our enemy is removed.

Love, on the other hand, is not a quick fix with an immediate pay off. It sometimes takes years of compassion to move from hostility to friendship. It can mean being the target of violence along the way. It requires courage and patience. But given time, we discover why we should choose it. **What makes love superior is that when you love your enemies, eventually you have none.**

The first step in eliminating my enemies was when I decided to believe Jesus, to choose love over violence, to accept his image of a loving God. This step is always necessary. As long as we hang onto the idea of a vengeful God who smites his enemies, we can never seriously attempt to love those who persecute us. As long as we can convince ourselves that God hates some people, we will be able to justify hating them as well. Only when we believe in a God who connects us all, does loving our enemies begin to make sense.

But that's only the first step. Deciding God doesn't hate people doesn't automatically mean we won't. For many years, I continued to hate people even though I believed God loved them. My prayers changed. I no longer wished them ill. Instead, I prayed, "God, you better love them because I sure can't." I no longer believed vengeance belonged to the Lord, but I wasn't completely ready to give it up myself.

As a teenager, Tony Jackson and Russell Cripe were on my prayer list. They were two older boys who bullied and terrorized me in junior high school. In the midst of their persecution, I could have written Psalm 21. I wanted God to eliminate them, painfully if possible. Fortunately, before God could smite them, school ended and they were promoted to high school.

Two years later, I joined them in high school with fear and trepidation. I had spent two years praying for them without much affect. I still thought of them often. I still hated and feared them. So you can imagine my surprise when I encountered one of them in the school hall and realized he didn't remember who I was. He'd completely forgotten those weeks of terrorizing me. Initially, instead of being relieved, I was angry about that. How could they forget what they'd done to me?

Later, I realized what I'd done to me. They had terrorized me for a few weeks. I had terrorized me for two years. This is a lesson I've had to learn several more times, but eventually I've realized why I have to eliminate hate from my life. Hate does far more damage to me than to my enemies. Anne Lamont says it this way, "Hate is like eating rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die." I

began to see that loving my enemies wasn't just for their sake; it was also for mine.

The second step in loving my enemies was letting go of the hate they had kindled, but that I had fed. But letting go of hate is not the same as loving someone. What we gain is apathy and not compassion. Tony Jackson and Russell Cripe were no longer my enemies, but they had not become my friends. For many years, I didn't think about them at all.

That changed a few years ago, when on a visit back home, I read in the local paper that Russell Cripe had been convicted of a crime and sent to prison. It was odd. As a child, I probably prayed for that. Now it gave me no joy. I'd spent time in jails and prisons with people like Russell. Many of them had become my friends. I'd learned to empathize with them. To see them as more than what they'd done.

This empathy is the third step in eliminating our enemies. When I see the frailty, insecurity and vulnerability of another person, it is very difficult to see them as my enemy. Empathy is the bridge from apathy to affection. It is that moment when I discover I want to talk to my enemy, to tell them how they hurt me. Not because I want to hurt them, but because I want them to understand that we share the capacity for pain. We are more alike than we are different.

Over the years, I've been amazed how often people who've been the victims of abuse will tell me, "I wish I could confront my abuser and tell them how they hurt me." In South Africa, aware of this dynamic, Nelson Mandela created the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. He created a means for victims of apartheid to face their enemies and tell them what they'd done.

I imagined such an encounter as I read about Russell Cripe in that newspaper article. I imagined visiting him, telling him who I was, reminding him of the bullying, forgiving him, and asking to hear his story. I didn't want us to be enemies.

This is the fourth step in eliminating our enemies. It is when we realize we're open to a relationship with them. We are willing for our enemies to become our friends.

Martin Luther King, Jr, describes this fourth step. He says, *"Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning."*

The words "I will forgive you, but I'll never forget what you've done" never explain the real nature of forgiveness. Certainly one can ever forget, if that means erasing it totally from our mind. But when we forgive, we forget in the sense that the evil deed is no longer a mental block impeding a new relationship. Likewise, we can never say, "I will forgive you, but I won't have anything further to do with you." Forgiveness means reconciliation, a coming together again."

As I finished this sermon, I gained new insight into why I've become a Universalist, convinced that all people will one day be reconciled with God and with one another. Heaven and hell only make sense if you believe in the God of vengeance and violence. They represent the culmination of a theology where enemies are to be hated and eliminated.

Hell makes no sense if Jesus commanded us to love our enemies. If we take him seriously, heaven's doors never close and forgiveness is always the offer of relationship. If we're followers of Jesus, we are asked to open the doors we've slammed shut, to offer forgiveness and even friendship.

This means, that while I don't have any enemies right now, I still have work to do. There are doors I need to reopen, relationships I could restore, opportunities to make my former enemies into friends. Isn't that the way of this journey? Just when you think you've arrived, you discover the next step.