

I've probably shared one of my favorite stories already about a priest who was giving a homily on Jesus' command from this gospel that we just read, to love your enemies. "Now," the priest said, "I'll bet that many of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives," so he asked the congregation to, "Raise your hands if you have many enemies." Well, quite a few people raised their hands at that point. Now he said, "Raise your hands if you only have a couple of enemies." Even fewer people raised their hands, but finally he said, "Raise your hands if you have no enemies at all." The priest looked around, didn't really see anybody, until he finally saw somebody in the way back, kind of waving his hand. He was a very old man, and he stood up and he said, "I have no enemies whatsoever." Too delighted, the priest invited him up to the front of the church to talk about it. Like, "What a blessing. Tell us more about this. What a wonderful Christian life you have led, tell us how you have no enemies." And he said, "Well, I mean, all those jerks have died."

You might have seen that punch line coming, but the story begs the question, is it possible to not have enemies? Is it possible to love our enemies? Because our gospel today with its call from Jesus to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, is probably what gave rise to GK Chesterton saying, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried."

Maybe he's right, because if we're going to take Jesus seriously, if we're going to say we're striving to follow Jesus, then we have to reckon with the difficult words, and I don't know about you, but I would really prefer it if Jesus just hadn't said that. It really feels impossible. The point here is that Jesus is calling us beyond the ways of the world though. In fact, we think about the Old Testament Leviticus and the passage that states, "If someone injures their neighbor, just as they have done, so it shall be done to them. Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth."

That sounds a lot easier to me, but believe it or not, that concept is actually written into scripture in order to limit the amount of revenge you could take on someone. At least make the revenge equitable, because that is how human relationships often unfortunately work, with things escalating at each

step. You yelled at me, now I'm going to yell at you, but a bit louder, right? Or you hit me, now I'm going to hit you, but a little harder or worse. And so, the ancients were at least trying to prevent that escalation of violence in this directive.

Jesus calls us to do better than that because Jesus does not condone revenge. The followers of Jesus are called to love, not hate, our enemies. Instead of an eye for an eye, he says, "Praying for them. Love them. Turn the other cheek."

Gandhi once said, "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind." Jesus agrees. But what does it really mean when Jesus says with this advice to turn the under cheek? A lot has been said about this. I mean, is he really just advising pure passivism here? Is he advising us to be victims and just take it?

Not quite. I don't think so. In fact, many scholars have noted that turning the other cheek was not about being a victim, but actually of exposing the evil being done. Because if I am struck in the face and I offer the other side also, it offers them the opportunity to starkly see what they are doing, potentially to stop and repent of it. Now clearly, if that doesn't cause them to pause, then nothing will, but if our first response to evil is always revenge, then the only endpoint will always be escalating violence and hatred.

Some of you were here when Dr. David Mosley came in, and he talked about this idea in one of our classes about turning the other cheek. And he sort of had us reenact it, and you can kind of visualize it. He described the fact that if somebody is hit, then when you turn the other cheek, you can no longer get a good direct hit anymore, so it is a bit of a tactic.

One way to think about it, I think, is to think about the fact that loving our enemies actually means being able to call them out, to reflect back to them the truth of the situation and force them to pause. It is a risk no doubt. The question that loving our enemies invites us is not to ask how do I get even or what is fair, but what will reveal and expose the truth of what is happening most clearly in love?

But I want to dig a little bit deeper. What does it mean when Jesus tells us to love our enemies? A few sermons ago, I talked about love, the Greek concept

of love, agape love, and we talked about the fact that love is not a feeling. Jesus isn't asking us to feel anything. Jesus isn't asking us to be sentimental about our enemies. Jesus is like the least sentimental person ever, but very loving. Jesus is asking us instead to act in a certain way. Dr. Scott Peck writes, "Love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. Love is as love does. Love is an act of the will, namely in intention and in action."

Think of it this way, and this is what helps me at least, because anybody who has ever had to parent a child or interact with a child for any extended amount of time knows that love actually involves making your children unhappy every single day. It means setting limits and saying no. It means allowing consequences to run their course, even when it's painful. It means challenging them when they are wrong. Yeah, of course, love also involves those sweet and precious moments: the affection, the praise, the words of support and encouragement. I would argue that those are byproducts, though, of those more difficult aspects of love that we have to put into action for our children's long-term best.

So, how do we love our enemies? Do the same thing. We love them in action. We intend and call them to be their best, in part, by exposing wrongs done, as well as celebrating and upholding the good they do. I don't think we can love our enemies without God's help, but I do think it is possible. It might be the hardest thing. It probably is the hardest thing we do as humans, but with God's help, we can take the necessary steps that love calls us to do, and it usually starts with that first thing Jesus said, "Pray for your enemies."

We start with prayer and that can move us to action, and then, it can look a lot like nonviolent resistance, the way that Dr. King and Gandhi live that out. Love is an action.

Now today is Outreach Sunday. We have the banners here. We're going to have our Outreach Fair afterward. We have folks here, representatives from different ministries. St. James has a lot of wonderful outreach ministries that provide support, that uphold our community and those in need, both near and far. Outreach itself is an act of love. We serve and love

those, even those we don't know at all, and we'll never meet. Even those we don't like. Even those we probably wouldn't like if we met them, but we love by taking action.

Notice right after Jesus tells us, "Love your enemies," he gives us an action. "Give your coat away, even your shirt away," he says, "Give to everyone who begs from you," and he gives us that golden rule, "Do to others, as you would have them do to you." We know that if we were in need, we would want others to help provide support, to act on our behalf if we could not, and so, we act in that way. When we support all these wonderful outreach ministries at St. James and beyond, we are fulfilling Jesus' call to love. Our outreach includes many different ministries. Military outreach, St. Mark's food pantries, St. Paul's food table, Casa Cornelia, ECS, St. Luke's, refugees. I mean, the list goes on. It is incredible, and there are just so many ways to act in love the way Jesus called us to.

When we love with God's help, love even our enemies, then evil and enmity themselves are destroyed in order to reveal God's truth in a confused world.

I want to close with a quote from a sermon that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote reflecting on the text that we just read. I think he can say it better than I can. He wrote this, "The words of this text glitter in our eyes with a new urgency. Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization. Love even for enemies."

Amen.