



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Love Your Enemies: What Is Supposed to Come from That?

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 5:43-48

July 10, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I want to thank you for this series. Back in April, I asked, “What do you want to talk about?” Over these past ten weeks, you gave us a chance to think together about some important questions. We have talked about citizenship. We have talked about forgiveness. We spent some time thinking about prayer. We asked where we find the fingerprints of God in the midst of suffering. We considered the politics of Jesus and the series began with what my family calls, “The Four Things.”

You have raised some difficult questions and I am not surprised; you are thoughtful people. We conclude this series with perhaps the hardest word we receive from Jesus. Everyone agrees that the ministry of Jesus is a life of love. There is nothing more commonly associated with the Christian faith than the idea that we are called to love our neighbors. The passage we read last week cited the command from Leviticus: Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. Jesus takes this idea of love and pushes it to unreasonable limits. Jesus seems to believe there is no circumstance, no situation, where love is not the response. “Love even your enemies,” he says. But what good will that do? Do you think that treating an enemy with kindness, grace, and love will change them? I wouldn’t count on that. That seems about as likely as this. (The worship service included a commercial which showed surprising pairs of animals playing together.)¹

Okay, so it’s a bit silly, but don’t you wish the world were like that? Where friendship could emerge, even when it’s beyond reason? Where chicks and cats could snuggle together? Where

dogs and lion cubs could roll around in the grass? Where sheep and elephants could play together in the sand box? There is a part of us that would love life to be that way, but the reality is: We all have enemies. From time to time, we have people in our lives who injure us, or belittle those we love, or oppress those they can gain an advantage over, or are just on the wrong side of things—they just don’t get it. And they can hurt us or just make us so angry. I think that is the most common emotion: Anger.

And Jesus says to love them? Loving them can feel like a crucifixion experience and it’s not likely to end up with puppies and lion cubs playing together in the yard. What good is that supposed to do?

As I said, a more common response is not love, but anger. And there is a lot of anger in the air these days. We are a divided nation. The public discourse is often hostile. Very seldom is the public discourse shaped by love—no, the public discourse is shaped primarily by anger.

My friend, Rev. Scott Black Johnston, is the senior pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. He has an excellent book that will come out in a couple months and in it, he notes that there are people around the world who are paid to fabricate stories for social media—where the entire point is to make folks angry at one another. It’s working. NPR reports that 84% of Americans identify that they are angrier than they were a generation ago. Johnston writes, “We are angry with politicians on ‘the other side.’ We are angry with the media who support them. And we are bent out of shape by thick-headed family and friends who do not share our particular brand of anger.”²

1 www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-NKpDTwMms

2 Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace*. p 53. (To be published by Westminster John Knox in September 2022.)

Anger is a power. And there is a place for anger. A fourth of July parade in Highland Park ends with senseless violence and I am so sick of this constant lack of humanity. It makes me angry.

My friend Bob works at our Food Pantry and said a young girl was there with her mother. The little girl asked if she could have a snack; she was hungry. Bob went and got her some Cheetos. She took them and said, “thank you.” She then sat down at a children’s table with crayons and began to color. When she finished, she handed her drawing to Bob. Spelled out in red crayon, it read: “I was hungry and you gave me food.”

When Bob showed it to me, it made me grateful for the ministry of our Pantry. But it also made me angry. Angry that there are so many children in this country who are hungry every day and far too many of them do not have a guy like Bob to give them something to eat.

It is almost impossible to get to lunchtime without learning something, hearing something, experiencing something that makes us angry. A friend of mine says he has a sign in his office that reads: “If you are not angry, you aren’t paying attention.” I get that. There is a place for anger. Even Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple. There is a place for anger. And the truth is: There is a sweetness to it. There is a sweetness because our anger is fueled by believing—even knowing—we are right and they are wrong. That’s what makes me so angry. It is a righteous anger: You are wrong and I am right.

So, why would Jesus call us to love enemies, particularly when our anger is justified? I’m not very hopeful that love is going to change them. So why go through all that effort? Maybe Jesus’ concern is not about them, but about us. Of what might happen to us if we continue to live in our anger.

My wise friend Scott Black Johnston says this, “Our faith reminds us that anger is a risky partner. ... In the heat of the moment, anger can feel good—but its lasting effects are caustic. Anger will betray you. It will eat away at your relationships, your integrity, and the very fabric of your community. The Bible makes it clear that anger is something best left to God, and even then, Scripture repeatedly

describes God as ‘slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love’ (Psalm 103:8).”³ Anger has a place, but it is risky.

Flannery O’Connor was a novelist and writer of short stories. She died in 1964 at the age of 39. Her writings were drenched in Southern culture and shaped by her Roman Catholic faith.

In her short story, “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” she writes of Julian, a young man who had gotten his education but not quite launched, still living with his mother whose racism was as present as her Southern drawl. The story takes place on a city bus. Much of the story reveals Julian’s unspoken thoughts regarding his mother. Regarding race, Julian is more enlightened than his mother. He sees the wrongheadedness of her condescending view of people of color. He sees it and he hates her for it.

As they exit the bus, Julian witnesses his mother, with a sappy sweet smile, engage in a belittling act toward an African American child. Julian decides to teach his mother a moral lesson. He spews his righteous anger. He calls her out for her racism, for her sin. He tells her that her assumed superiority is a sham, an illusion.

The story ends with his mother, shaken by the attack, stumbling to the sidewalk, and suffering a stroke. It becomes clear that Julian’s anger, which was justified, had consumed him and he had become that which he hated. His rightness filled him with condescension.

When anger becomes the lasting lens through which we view one another, we run the risk of becoming that which we hate. To say it simply: Anger is sometimes justified, but it is not justification for bad behavior.

Loving your enemies may not have any impact on them. It may not change them; the two of you may not end up like a puppy dog and a lion cub playing in the grass. But the goal is more modest than that. The goal is to make sure that our anger doesn’t reduce our behavior to something that mirrors the behavior of our enemies.

Everyday there are issues and moral demands and situations in which we all must discern what is right. The world is filled with injustice and oppres-

3 Johnston, *Elusive Grace*, p 54

sion, with meanness and hatred. And in every case, faith calls us to discern what is right. And when we do, it will put us at odds, maybe even at enmity with those who are wrong—from our perspective, just wrong.

But, when we have discerned what is right, when we have discerned what our faith expects of us, then Jesus calls us to pursue not just rightness, but righteousness. Being right is not enough; we must also be righteous. Righteousness is a relational category. Righteousness speaks to how we are with our neighbor. To our relationships. And Jesus says: Love is always the right choice. It may not change the enemy, but it may keep us from becoming that which we condemn.

There is an apocryphal story from the Civil War. An army, I can't remember whether it was the Northern or Confederate army, and it doesn't matter. An army was marching into a town and a woman was marching against them carrying only a broom. A neighbor stopped her and said, "They have horses and muskets and cannons. You can't beat them with a broom." She said, "Maybe not, but at least they will know whose side I am on."

Part of the challenge of the faith is the call, as we said a few weeks ago, to let our engagement

with the world be shaped less by what the world has done to us and more by what God has done for us. That's the side we are on.

I got an email recently. I do not know this person, but it is someone who is, shall we say, less than enamored with me. From someone who thinks I have misread scripture, and if I am not Satan himself, I at least seem to be on his side.

I read it and it made me angry. It wasn't fair. It wasn't kind. I responded. It was eloquent and clever and devastating. And thank God I didn't send it. I let it sit, until my anger no longer governed my response. My response was less eloquent or convincing, but it was kind—at least I hope it was. And this emailer probably feels justified, I don't know. But I know that I am grateful I don't have to be ashamed of my response.

You have been there. Are you angry? Most folks are from time to time. For some folks, it is almost all the time. It's often justified; it's just not often the most precise tool for making things better.

So, Jesus says: Try love. Jesus says there is no circumstance where love is not the right response and the righteous response. It may not change the world, but at least the world will know whose side we are on.