



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"A More Excellent Way" - Matthew 5:43-48

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Over the last couple of months we've been thinking about how we can have healthy relationships. And today we're going to tackle what is probably without a doubt, the easiest of the subjects we've decided to explore in this sermon series. Let me read for you just the first two sentences from today's text, which comes from Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount.

Listen to this. Matthew 5:43: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven..."* Okay. Let's stop right there.

Love. Your. Enemies! Really? I have a hard enough time showing adequate love to my family and friends. How in the world am I supposed to love people who are out to get me, to take me down? That doesn't seem possible. I'm up for trying to live out the first sentence in that passage. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

I think I might be able to do that. But love my enemies? Really? Really? Jesus seems to think that we can do it and this section of his sermon is about how and why we can.

As I thought about this passage, one of the things that came to my mind, to be completely honest, is that right now I don't think I have any real enemies. I may be wrong about that but I don't think there is anyone out there who sees me as their enemy. I'm sure there are people out there who get irritated with me, who are disappointed with me, who don't understand me or don't like the way I do my job. It's hard for me to actually believe that there really is any such person—but it is possible. I can imagine that there are people out there whom I've let down but I don't think I have any full on enemies. I could be wrong about that. There have been seasons in my life when I'm pretty sure I did have some enemies.

According to the dictionary, an enemy is a person who is actively opposed or hostile to someone or something. An enemy is an opponent, an adversary, a foe, a rival, an antagonist, a combatant, a challenger, a competitor. So, do I have any enemies? Do you?

If we do, what does Jesus say we're to do with our enemies? He calls us to love them. Let me take this passage a part and see if we can make any sense of what Jesus is teaching us. If we're supposed to love our enemies, he needs to show us **how** and **why** we should

do that.

Matthew 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' That so far sounds doable. I think I might be able to love my neighbor, as long as they stay on their side of the fence and don't make too much noise. You've heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Well, who says that? I can tell who doesn't teach that. Jesus Christ doesn't teach that. Love your neighbor and hate your enemy is just about the best advice the world around us can come up with. Love those who are close by, who live in your neighborhood, who are most likely a lot like you. And then hate your adversaries, your foes whether they are real or perceived. But listen to Jesus, and look at his life. Here it comes.

Verse 44, *"But I say to you, but I say to you, but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."*

Jesus says to his disciples, "You're God's kids and I want you to reflect the values of your new family." God blesses evil people and good people.

The sun comes up on both the good and the bad. Both are given a new day to live. Does He send rain on the crops of the ethical and upstanding citizens but positions the scorching sun over the houses and land of the bad guys? No! He chooses to send rain on the good people and the bad.

Verse 46, *“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”*

Love. Your. Enemies. If we’re a follower of Christ, Jesus, simply, yet pointedly He says, “We need to do things differently. We need to stop taking our cues from the world around you and imitate me.” To wrap up this section of his sermon Jesus blows us out of the water with his next statement.

Verse 48, *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* Really Jesus? Be perfect? Be like You? Live like You? Treat my enemies like You treat Yours? That should drive all us to the end of ourselves. Because we can’t do that and Jesus knows that we can’t, on our own, do this. He’s driving us back to the beginning of his sermon.

Jesus’ amazing talk on the mountainside starts with these words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit. For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. This is what being poor in spirit looks like—a simple acknowledgement that I have nothing except the poverty of my spirit to offer God. I can’t do this on my own. No excuses. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God. That word of grace stands at the center of the life of the follower of Christ. That’s

where our life with Christ begins and it is in that grace that we live every single moment of our lives.

“Be perfect.” That drives us back to Christ. “Be perfect.” That means become a mature follower of Christ. Continue to grow spiritually so that you will increasingly look just like your Father in heaven. That’s Christ’s trajectory for our lives. And Jesus is not going to settle for anything less than the full transformation of our hearts and of our characters until they look like his.

Love. Love. Love your enemies. How can I do that Jesus? Why should I do that?

I don’t think I have any enemies, at least none that I know of. But I do know what it is like to be irritated with people. I do know what it’s like when I feel like people are making my life more difficult than it needs to be. I do know what it is like when people treat me unjustly. I know what that’s like. I know what it’s like when untrue things are said about me. I know what that feels like. What Jesus has to say about loving our enemies is a wisdom that we can apply to all sorts of situations where we experience the hurtful actions of others, whether they’re our enemy or not. What Jesus says here in this part of his sermon can help us in all sorts of conflicts.

When I was serving as the Interim Senior Pastor at First Pres. Berkeley, I remember a week when I was particularly stressed out. It certainly wasn’t the only week of high stress. But that week my personal and my work calendars were packed. I was in the middle of moving from one house to another and I had a ton of ministry commitments. My week was completely sold out and at the last minute I was asked to

step in and lead a graveside service for a remarkable person in our church that had just died. It was a tremendous honor to be a part of that service. But I have to admit that I was feeling kind of sorry for myself. I had so much to do and it seemed like no one else was willing to or able to step up and take on this responsibility.

On the day of the memorial service I was at home and I was running a little late. At the last minute I discovered that there was going to be some special elements in this graveside service that I wasn’t sure I was prepared to lead. I started to get a little more stressed out. I jumped into my car and as I pulled away from the curb my car started to overheat. So I turned around and went back to my house and filled the radiator with water. I was beginning to sweat. I jumped back into my car and headed for the church, where I was going to pick up one of our interns who was interested in learning how to lead a graveside memorial service from one his deeply spiritual and peace-filled pastoral mentors.

As I pulled away from the curb, I felt the Spirit of God clearly say to me, “Tim, it’s not just your car. YOU’RE overheating and you’d better be careful.” I didn’t listen. As I drove to the church, I continued to rehearse all the reasons why I was frustrated that no one else had stepped forward to help me out that week. As I drove down Tunnel Road, which leads from the Oakland Hills and into Berkeley, the traffic was heavier than usual. For just a second, I got distracted. I looked up and to my horror the traffic in front of me was completely stopped. I stood on the breaks but it was too late. I totaled my eleven-year-old Volkswagen Jetta. Bam!

Fortunately, no one was hurt. It was completely my fault. I confessed this immediately to the person I hit, who could not have been a more gracious. Over the next few days, I also confessed all of this to a couple of insurance companies. It was completely my fault. It wasn't the fault of the pastor who was supposed to lead the memorial service but had gotten sick. It wasn't the fault of any of the other pastors who were unable to step in. It wasn't the fault of anyone who had anything to do with why I needed to move or anything else that was stressing me out that week. It was completely my fault. There was amazing freedom in simply admitting that. No attempts at justification. It was my fault.

I made it to the graveside service, thanks to our administrative manger, who picked me up at the bottom of Tunnel Road where my now completely disabled car died. The memorial service was really quite moving. The family and their friends knew nothing about what had just happened to me. They didn't need to know any of that. They weren't there to take care of me. God had called me, even in that moment, to serve them. Maybe it was adrenaline, maybe it was the Holy Spirit, maybe it's that coping mechanism I've developed over time that enables me to sometimes compartmentalize things when I need to deal with a crisis. Whatever it was, I made it through the memorial service. And it was a wonderful experience.

It would have been so easy to find someone else to blame for this big mess in my life. It would have been easy to nurse bitter feelings towards someone else who might have been involved on the periphery in this situation but in this case, as I told the insurance

adjuster, it was all me. Blessed are the poor in Spirit. That is a good place to be. It was all me. I've got nothing. No excuses. Just fully, human me.

A few months after I totaled my Jetta, I purchased a new car. And interestingly enough, my new car came with an owner's manual. Your car probably has one too. The owner's manual is a book. It's usually a series of books that are filled with a lot of great information about how my car works and how I should take care of it. It's a book written by the people who manufactured my car. It tells me how to operate various features. It tells me how often my car needs to be serviced. It tells me how to drive in snow which I'm really good at but isn't a skill I need very often here in Hawaii. The people who put my car together wrote a book and gave it to me. Here! Read and follow these instructions. This is one of those sermon illustrations that anyone can see coming at them from a mile away. You all know exactly where I'm going with this.

Here, in the Sermon on the Mount, are the operating instructions from the One who created us. We are reading Christ's instructions for how we are to live our lives, when someone slams their car intentionally or unintentionally into ours. What do we do when that happens? What do we do when we're on the receiving end of the angry words of a family member or colleague? What do we do when we've been lied to or betrayed or when we've been misled by someone or when someone has violated our trust and all that is left of that relationship is conflict and distance and silence? Jesus says in his sermon, "Love. Your. Enemies. Love your adversaries. Love those who oppose you."

Okay, Jesus. **How** are we supposed to do that? And exactly **why** am I supposed to do that?

Before we look at Jesus' advice to us, I want to say something to any child or any spouse who is listening to me right now and who is being physically or emotionally abused by a person in your life. If you're in a relationship of any kind where you are being abused you need to get yourself to a place of safety. I do not want you to hear anything that I'm about to say and think that you're supposed to continue to stand there and take the abuse. What is being done to you is wrong and you do not need to stand there and take it. Seek help.

With that said, there are some very important insights that Jesus has for us in this very salty, counter-intuitive teaching. In the passage that immediately precedes today's text Jesus essentially says to us, "Don't be an echo." Don't simply respond to people who have hurt you by hurting them back. Don't be a human echo. We don't have time today to unpack the specifics of what he says but listen to Jesus. When treated badly, don't be an echo. Instead work to change the dynamics of the encounter.

Matthew 5:38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

First, Jesus is not talking about what we do when someone is abusing someone else. In fact, in another part of Matthew we are told that we are to challenge what another person is doing when they are hurting someone else. So what is He teaching when he says, “Do not resist an evil person.”

He gives four illustrations from everyday life. How are we, the people who are being transformed by the gospel, supposed to respond in situations like this? Here’s what he’s saying: We’re not to try and get even. But we are not to just passively stand there either. There is nothing passive in any of Jesus’ illustrations. In each case He is saying, don’t try to get even. Instead, try to change the dynamics of the encounter. We are not called to surrender to evil but to overcome evil with good.

Jesus is calling us to freedom. Our behavior must not be determined by how we are treated. We must not adopt the approach used by our opponents. Don’t use the weapons of the wrongdoer, to fight on his or her level. Don’t do it. Rise above it and use higher weapons. Don’t live your life as an echo. Learn how to love your enemies.

Jesus does not say, “Like your enemies, feel good feelings for your enemies.” Look at the choice of verb he uses in Matthew 5:44 when he says, “Love your enemies.” Jesus had four verbs for love to choose from: He could have used the word “storge” which is the love we have for our family. But Jesus did not say, “Storge your enemies.” He could have used the word “eros”, which is the love of beauty. This is a kind of love that includes sexual intimacy in marriage. Jesus did not say, show that kind of love for your enemies. He also didn’t use the word

“phileo” which is the love that exists between friends who share common passions and interests. Jesus did not say, “Phileo your enemies”.

Jesus chose the fourth word for love in Greek. He used the word “agape” which is kind of love that makes a decision to love a person even if the object of that love is unworthy of that love. Agape is a decision to act towards a person in ways they may not deserve. Agape is the will, to will the good will of another person, even if they have done nothing to deserve it and may not receive it.

Agape is the way God loves us. If we respond to our enemies’ hate by willing their good the dynamics of that relationship might just begin to change. What will certainly happen is that you and I will begin to change. To keep on hating someone for what they have done to us only perpetuates hate, and it rots our soul. It changes us but not for the better. If we give into our hate we will die inside. We are to choose to love even our enemies because we want to be whole, to be like Jesus. God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. His love is indiscriminate. Jesus is evenhanded and in being so he reveals God’s will for how we are to live our lives.

This text raises all sorts of questions that we don’t have time to consider today. Questions like, “How do you and I show this love in the specific situations in our lives?” I can’t tell you the answer to that question, at least not from up here. How do you love your enemies? That’s your homework assignment. How I love my enemies and the people who might be making my life difficult is my assignment. We show this kind of love in our commitment to

pray for the person who has harmed us. And we try to show it in the decisions we make to will the good will of that person who has hurt us and betrayed us. We don’t seek revenge but we join Jesus Christ in overcoming evil with good.

One of the most surprising truths of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ we discover that we have a God who is an enemy-loving God. Our God is an enemy-loving God. Why should we seek to love our enemies? Because He wants us to be healed. Jesus wants to free us from the bitterness that is eating away at our hearts and minds as we rehearse, day after day, over and over what was done to us. When we seek to will the good will of a person who has hurt us, just maybe that other person will also be set free.

Our God is an enemy-loving God. That’s at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our God loves His enemies. And that is good news, not just for all the bad people in your life that you’re thinking about right now. That’s not just good news for your business competitors or that person you’ve been in conflict with for the last 20 years. It IS good news for all of them. But it is good news for you and me because we once were God’s enemies. And he loved us. While we were still sinners, while our backs were turned against God, God loved us. Because God love us when we were his enemies, we can learn to love our enemies as well. Jesus Christ died for us that we might love. It’s the best news in the world that our God is an enemy-loving God. That is good news for all of us. And we have the opportunity to show that good news by loving our enemies. Don’t miss this invitation to freedom.