

“Giving Up Enemies”

March 26, 2017

Giving It Up series – Fourth Sunday in Lent

The current political climate would suggest that enemies are easier to come by than friends. We hear more about how divided Congress is than how they’re seeking to work together. So when Will Hurd and Beto O’Rourke - two representatives from Texas - and, yes, you guessed it - one a Republican and the other a Democrat - decided to take a road trip and live stream it as a “town hall” event on social media two weeks ago, it was a big deal!

Their flight back to Washington, D.C. was canceled when the snowstorm hit D.C., so they rented a car together and drove back. Hurd and O’Rourke developed quite a following over social media and covered a lot of ground in 24 hours - healthcare reform, education, where to stop and eat and more.

Perhaps these two didn’t view one another as enemies, but maybe they didn’t consider one another friends either. Their willingness to engage one another got people talking and thinking!

Maybe you’ve heard about the unlikely friendship between Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the late Justice Antonin Scalia. Scalia said, “If you can’t disagree ardently with your colleagues about some issues of law and yet personally still be friends, get another job, for Pete’s sake.”

And Ginsburg’s reaction is similar: “As annoyed as you might be about his zinging dissent, he’s so utterly charming, so amusing, so sometimes outrageous, you can’t help but say, ‘I’m glad that he’s my friend or he’s my colleague.’” The pair were shopping buddies when they traveled together, and their families spent time together.

I’m a sucker for a good unlikely friendship story or “when enemies become friends” story. You can find a lot of them – soldiers who fought on opposite sides in WWII and found each other later on only to become friends, a convicted drug dealer and a police officer who befriend each other while working together to solve cases, and incredible stories of forgiveness that go beyond our comprehension and show deep faith and trust in God.

Perhaps you remember the shooting at an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania in 2006. It was awful to fathom, but the even more unbelievable part was the reaction of the Amish community toward the shooter who took his own life and to his family left behind – his wife and children. They embraced them and showed deep compassion.

And the community of faith at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, when a young man came into a prayer service and killed nine people and injured 3 in June 2015. The reactions of victims' families during the shooter's bond hearing – sincere words of forgiveness – were powerful and honestly even difficult to hear. These stories seem far out of the realm of possibility, too hard, and too much to handle.

As I thought about giving up enemies, my mind went to both the light-hearted story of reaching across the aisle - and to the deeper, more painful example of forgiveness. I thought of a man I know named Darcey who shared his story of forgiving someone who had hurt him and his family because, he said, he was forgiven.

I know what Jesus says about enemies – about loving enemies and praying for those who persecute us. Inevitably if I ask how that makes you feel, someone will speak the truth. "It's hard." Yes, it is, and I think it's even hard to hear.

Jesus wasn't a stranger to what it meant to love enemies. He wasn't a stranger to praying for those who persecuted him. And yet, if you're like me, when I remember that, I sometimes cast it aside quickly. *"Well, it's Jesus. I'm not Jesus. What does he expect from me?"*

Friends, the expectation is clear. Love your enemies...Love is the only way to change the game. Love is the only way to make a difference. Love is the only way to transform the world and to be transformed ourselves. It's not about getting even or being right – how many of us like getting even and being right? It's about sharing the love of God.

Jesus wasn't saying it simply for the benefit of others. He was saying it because he knew the power of hatred, anger, and bitterness in our lives. He knew that harboring hatred could and would destroy us. He knew it would keep us from experiencing the true peace that he offers. It's not easy. It's not fast. For many, it's not normal. Philip Gulley says, "Hatred is a choice. We choose to hate, just as we choose to love."

We're told about two times when Jesus weeps in Scripture. Maybe there were more. But we hear about Jesus weeping once at the grave of Lazarus (we'll hear more about that next week!) and once when he comes into Jerusalem. We assume that Jesus weeps because even though he's received well, even though they praise God because of miracles he's performed, he knows that the people don't have the right idea or the right expectation for who he is and what he's going to do to bring peace. He won't be the one to show military might and overthrow the Romans. He'll be betrayed, arrested, beaten, killed, and left to die.

And the Temple will eventually be destroyed in 70 AD. Nothing that is standing will remain except the peace that he offers through his death on the cross. And even

though he will be despised and rejected, he loves and persists in loving to the end and beyond.

Some of us might have given up the notion that peace is even possible right now - today. Maybe we don't claim to have mortal enemies, but we struggle with people who have different ideas and beliefs, people who have hurt us, those we're at war with, and even people close to us.

We desire peace in our lives and our relationships, but it seems elusive and out of reach. Again, it's not easy or quick. If we're struggling with holding onto grudges or avoiding certain people because we don't want to deal with them, perhaps it's time to allow God in. The peace that Jesus offers isn't just for a time down the road – or the peace that comes only with eternal life. There's a promise of peace now.

As Jesus speaks about loving our enemies, we have to remember that God never held a different standard for different people – whether friends, enemies, strangers. But the Law carried a sense that friends and enemies were to be treated differently. But Jesus says no – that those who want to follow him must love enemies and pray for them.

Jesus prayed as he was being beaten and killed. We may not feel any love for someone we call an enemy, but what would it be like to pray for that person, even if we don't feel love? What would it be like to pray for good for them? Prayer is powerful in our lives and in the lives of those we pray for. Someone wrote: "When we pray for those who wrong us, we transform ourselves and become clearer channels for God's power, through which we can promote peace with justice in the world."

As we consider giving up enemies, there are bigger questions that Jesus asks. What more are we doing than others? How far will we go to love as God loves? This is a not a call to self-righteousness, but a call to self-examination. Are we just doing what makes us comfortable, or are we doing more? Are we loving those who are easy to love, or are we seeking to love and pray for those who make life difficult for us? And how many of us have people who are difficult to love and pray for?

Pastor Edwin Searcy says that we who claim to follow Jesus Christ are uncomfortable with God's call to be perfect – to be holy. That's where Jesus ends up at the end of this – seeking to be holy. We don't want to become prideful, it's true. But Searcy contends that we're also just lazy. He says, "We're called to be witnesses to God's coming reign, but we'd rather fit in than stand out. The church is to be the distinctive witness of a people who mirror the holiness of God."

Jesus guides us in how we act, but it's not just a moral code or a guide to ethics. He offers us the Kingdom of God and reveals God's desire for us – to act out of who we are because we belong to God. *Live in a way that shows your relationship with me.* We

can't set this aside and think that it only applies to people who are much more faithful or much more religious – to “saints” like Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King. This is for us!

Friends, Jesus calls us to go against everything that we want to do, but our witness points to another reality. When we live this way, we show the power of God who redefines power and strength. For in all of God's power, God chose to be one of us in Jesus. In all God's power, God chose to live with us and among us. In all God's power, God chose relationship with us instead of death. God chose forgiveness and new life. And every day, we choose how to respond to that kind of love.

Frederick Buechner says: “The love for equals is a human thing — of friend for friend, brother for brother, (sister for sister). It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing — the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing — to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich... The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy — love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world.”

Yes, Jesus is talking about how we live together, but there's more at stake here. This is about the very essence of who God is, and God needs us to show it to the world. God chose to give us what we didn't deserve – that's why we call it “grace” – a free gift given to us. We can choose to respond with grace – not giving others what they deserve, but seeking the highest good instead of the worst harm for them.

Even as I hear myself say it, it may seem impossible. And it is if we don't rely on God's help. There is no way we can do it alone. We need God's help and courage – and we need each other as the Body of Christ.

May God help us to give up enemies - so that we might truly know the peace of Christ and let it rule in our hearts.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.