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Matthew 5:38-48

Tough Love

The YouTube video is grainy.
The audio hardly audible.
But within an hour or so, it is viewed by thousands.

And just like that, Twitter lights up so fast and bright that satellites overhead start to overheat.

“Love your enemies.”
#seriously?
#loveyourwho?
#itjustgotreal.

All of Jerusalem is talking about it.

It’s all over Facebook.

Even the parts of Mesopotamia and Cappadocia that still have dial-up eventually see this clip of the Sermon on the Mount.

And as you can imagine, the comments come rolling in in big numbers.
They keep coming.

Basically, Jesus blows up the internet before there is an internet.

And here’s what does it:

*You have heard that it was said,
You shall love your neighbor
and hate your enemy.*

*But I say to you
Love you enemies
and pray for those who persecute you.*

As far as anyone can remember, no one ever said such a thing.

I mean, *hate your enemy* — that message is everywhere.
Well, almost everywhere.

“Hate your enemy” is not in the Bible.
Just like “God helps those who help themselves” is not in the Bible.

But it's out there — “hate you enemy.”
It's on talk radio.
It's on billboards.

And it's in here, too.

Answering hate with hate seems to be written into our DNA.
It's written into our history books.
It's even written into the Hammurabi Code twenty centuries before Christ —
“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

Jesus knows that “hate your enemy” is a thing.
Because he knows a thing or two about being human.

And his response to this is new and different.
His response is love.
Love you enemy.

Now, to some who hear it it sounds absurd.
He's joking — right?

To others it's a tactical error.
It's too much, too fast.

Jesus should have started with “love those who mildly annoy you.”
Love the ones in the check-out line for whom 12 Items of Less does not apply.
Love the ones who turn every conversation into a conversation about themselves.
Love the ones who let their dogs decorate your lawn.
Then Jesus could have worked his way up the love ladder to ENEMY.

And then, of course, there are the Jewish and Roman think tanks
who set out to discredit the whole idea of “love your enemies.”
They get right to work crafting position papers with testosterone-y titles like:
“Sweet Jesus: Only Sissies Love Their Enemies.”
And “Enemy Love: Christian Ethics for the Weak and Cowardly.”

But, you know, beyond the peals of mocking laughter
and the second-guessing and the undermining,
there are a dule of doves who can't get enough of it.

They play and replay that grainy You Tube video.

They are sure they have just heard the bravest words anyone has ever said.
Words on which the future of the world depends.

*Love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you.*

That's a new and different kind of tough love.

And it isn't long before we ask, "How?"
HOW do we do this?
HOW do we love our enemies?

This question of HOW is as pointed now as it's ever been.
I think we have some more soul work to do.

So, let's start with what loving your enemy does not mean.

It does not mean that your highest moral standards
are somehow null and void.

It does not mean that you need to acquiesce to words and actions
that demean you or anyone else.

It does not mean that it's okay when someone hurts another on purpose.

It does not mean dismiss, discount, diminish the damage done.

And it does not mean that we need to muster up fuzzy feelings
for someone who lashes out and lies to our face and fans the flames of hate.

Love your enemies is not a sentimental project.
And it is definitely not for the weak and cowardly.
It's tough love — it's hard to do.

But here are two things we can do.

We all can recognize that the words and deeds of another human being
do not express all that he or she is.

It's been said many times:
There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.

And when we actively remember this, we are less prone to demonize another.

“Love your enemy” is a fierce commitment
to look and see the humanity in the one who makes us crazy.

And it’s an equally fierce commitment
to see the fullness of who we are.
This means self-reflection.
Self-examination.

The longer we look, the more we see, the clearer it becomes
that our common impulse to hate comes from the same starting line of
hurt and ignorance and prejudice and misunderstanding.

The person we want to throttle is a human being.
A human being made in the image of God, like we are.
A human being as sometimes kind and unkind, as we are.

We can remember that.

And we all can pray.

That’s a good thing, because we also love our enemy by praying for our enemy.

So, to pray this way, to pray for those who persecute you,
does not require niceness.

But I have found it difficult to be snarky in prayer.
It just doesn’t work.

I find it more helpful to pray for help.
And to commend the one who offends me deeply
to the One who loves more deeply than I.

The God I believe in — the God Jesus reveals —
loves everyone, even the ones I don’t like.

Does it drive me nuts that God seems to have such low standards?
Yes — in all my self-righteousness — sometimes it does.

Nevertheless, I persist in prayer.
I pray not to change his heart, not to change her mind.
I pray to change myself and to free myself from the corrosive power of hate.

It will not surprise you to hear, then,

that the past month has provided me — and perhaps others —
with spiritual growth opportunities.
SGOs.

As a white guy, I'm troubled by what looks to me like the rising tide
of white nationalism in our country.

And as an American Christian, I am troubled by the apparent okay-ness
with a President who routinely talks about whole groups of people
in ways that are not at all okay.

So, I've been working late.
Looking for the good in our President.
Looking for the good in me, too.

And I've been working on a prayer.
It isn't much — really.
A work in progress. (Aren't we all?)

Anyway, this is my prayer today —
would you please join me?

—

God, help us.
All of us.

Including him.
Including me.

Including those who think well of him.
Including those who have other ideas.

God help all of us
to love all of us.

We are made for this.
And we can do this all by ourselves ... with your help.

Amen.
And amen.