

7 Epiphany Yr C, 20/02/2022  
Lk 6:27-38  
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“On loving enemies”

Reversals, reversals, and more reversals. Is it easier to drive in reverse or forward? I hazard to guess that most of you—maybe all of you!--would answer that it's easier to drive forward. I too would agree with you. In a similar way, when we look at today's gospel, we see and hear a lot of reversals. Reversals that, in our natural, human sinful state, we are inclined to say: “You have to be joking Jesus! Love your enemies?! Impossible!” Yet, it was Jesus himself who showed us the way, by praying for forgiveness for those who crucified him. You also remember the story of Stephen's martyrdom, he too prayed for forgiveness for those who stoned him to death.

That reminds me of an old classic film called “Heaven's Above!” Perhaps some of you have seen it. By a mistake over the name an idealist Anglican priest is sent to a prosperous city church. He does exactly what our gospel demands. He appoints a black church warden (it was in the 1950s). He opens up the vicarage to all the down and outs. And the inevitable happens. He not only alienates the respectable members of the congregation but becomes the focus of all the layabouts, scroungers and rascals in the neighbourhood. The lead is stripped off the church roof. Economically and in terms of building up the church it is a catastrophe—and the priest has to run away from the situation he has created. The last we see of him is in a rocket heading for outer space.

Isn't that what the carrying out of the programme set out in the gospel is sure to lead to? And I find myself looking for ways to escape. There are plenty. You couldn't run a society on these 'rules'. And we cannot all be Mother Teresa. So where do I stand? Where do you?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Rodd, “There you've lost me,” in: *The Expository Times* Vol. 103, October 1991-September 1992 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), pp. 302-303.

The answer is that only with the help of God's grace are we able to love our enemies. That reminds me of another story. A man down the road from Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock when he was a boy was named Cook, Mr. Cook. Dr. Craddock never knew his first name; he was Mr. Cook. The Craddocks said "Mr." and "Mrs." to everybody. Mr. Cook was a hateful man, and he killed the Craddock's dog. Their dog was named Dempsey after the prizefighter Jack Dempsey. He was just a dog, but he was Craddock's dog, and he went with them everywhere. And Mr. Cook killed him.

When Dr. Craddock's father came in one evening before dinner, Dr. Craddock said to him, "Mr. Cook killed Dempsey." His father didn't even stay in the house for supper. He went down the road, and the five Craddock kids were saying, "Go get him, go get him." Dr. Craddock's mother was in the kitchen, crying and praying. Dr. Craddock's father was gone a long time, and his mother was very worried. When his Dad came back in, he had blood on his shirt. The family wanted to know what happened. He said, "I never knew that Mr. Cook was an epileptic."

"What? He's an epileptic?"

"I went down there to let him have it, and he was on the porch in a seizure—chewing his tongue, and his mouth was bleeding. I got my hand in his mouth, got him free of chewing his tongue, and took him in the house and cared for him until he was able to get up and sit in a chair. That's where I got the blood."

Dr. Craddock said, "Well, now that he's feeling better, you going to go down there now and beat him up?"

And he said, "No."<sup>2</sup>

Love your enemies. There are different Greek words for love. The word Luke chooses here is *agape*—self-giving love. It describes an active feeling of benevolence towards the other person; it means that no matter what that person does to us we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but his or her highest good; and we will deliberately and of

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<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 136.

set purpose go out of our way to be good and kind to him or her. This is most suggestive. We cannot love our enemies as we love our nearest and dearest. To do so would be unnatural, impossible and even wrong. But we can see to it that, no matter what a person does to us, even if he or she insults, ill-treats and injures us, we will seek nothing but their highest good.

One thing emerges from this. The love we bear to our dear ones is something we cannot help. We speak of *falling* in love; it is something which happens to us. But this love towards our enemies is not only something of the heart; it is something of the will. It is something which by the grace of Christ we may will ourselves to do.<sup>3</sup> One hopes and prays that the Russians and the Ukrainians would will themselves to love their enemies by averting a war. One also hopes and prays that the situation across Canada would improve among those who have expressed their hatred and even violent threats to kill our Prime Minister. One hopes and prays that such hatred and violent threats would be transformed into love for one's enemies.

Okay, in light of the fact that it is a difficult thing to love our enemies, what will help us? Well, Jesus goes on to say pray for those who abuse you. Now that does, at first seem rather impossible. We are more inclined not to like or even hate someone who abuses us, not love them. Why should we pray for them? As a matter of fact, if their name ever comes up in our prayers, it is generally in terms of some kind of violent death, or at least painful injury. But Jesus does not say "pray about them," he says, "Pray for them" (Luke 6:28). It works. You just cannot hate someone for whom you are praying. Praying for our enemies helps us realize that hating anyone does more harm to the one doing the hating than the one who is the object of that hate. So prayer helps us to let go of hate and love the enemy.

Praying for abusers however does not mean that we tolerate abuse. NO! If we know of say a wife or children being abused, our prayer needs to lead to action. Our prayer

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<sup>3</sup> Wm. Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke* (Burlington, ON: G.R. Welch Co. Ltd., 1975), pp. 78-79.

may very well lead us to help such an abused wife and abused children by taking them to a women's shelter, and even by confronting the abuser husband, encouraging them to seek professional help and counselling. Plus, such abuse also needs to be reported to the authorities.

Love your enemies? Are you kidding, Lord? No. Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28).

There are days when that might seem preposterous, ill-timed, and unrealistic. But, you know, it just might work.<sup>4</sup> It certainly worked for concentration camp survivor, Corrie Ten-Boom. I'd like to end with this profound quote from her: "You never so touch the ocean of God's love as when you forgive and love your enemies." With the help and grace of our Lord, may it be so for you and I!

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Leininger, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: Series VI, Cycle C* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc.), cited from sermonsuite.com.