

“A Way to Move beyond ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ Thinking”

Matthew 5:38-48

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A couple of weeks ago, I participated in a common text study at Temple Beth Or. It was part of a larger series of studies led by a rabbi from Durham. This study focused on the two great loves – the love of God and the love of neighbor. There were Jews, Christians, Muslims and one Buddhist at the meeting, and we began with a study of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Rabbi Dinner from Temple Beth Or was amazed at how quiet Dr. Harshaw, from the other First Baptist, and I were early on. I told her it was helpful for us to hear what outsiders to our faith, rabbis and imams, saw in the text. It was fascinating actually and we eventually talked enough.

In the middle of the discussion, as we reflected on the place of the Samaritan as a hated outsider in the first-century, one woman offered an insight that has stuck with me. “We often reference the text about the love of money being the root of all evil,” she said, “But I have begun to wonder if ‘us’ and ‘them’ thinking hasn’t become more of a problem.” Everyone in the room seemed to resonate with her perspective. There are many kinds of evil and many roots or sources, but the human tendency to divide the world into “us” and “them” categories, then denigrate “them” and ultimately justify all sorts of injustice and hostility is a central cancer eating away at the world.

It happens on all levels of human interaction. Whether we are talking about North and South Koreans, Israelis and Palestinians, Christians and Muslims, Protestants and Catholics, Sunnis and Shias, blacks and whites and Latinos, longstanding citizens and more recent immigrants, liberals and conservatives, democrats and republicans, or Blue Devils and Tar Heels and the Wolfpack, we divide the world into more and more groups of “us” and “them” and in the very act of labeling and dividing, we begun the process of dehumanizing which creates the space to treat the other, whoever the other is, differently.

At a ballgame, this means cheering for our team, booing theirs and wondering how someone could be so silly as to cheer for them. In a church or civic group, this means huddling up in our crowd, plotting against the other crowd and at times going our separate ways. In national life, this means working against each other, voting against each other and writing nasty blogs, editorials and social media posts. In international affairs, this means going to war and assuming that God is on our side even though they think God is on their side. And of course, the truth is, with nuclear weapons in play, and over a billion Christians and over a billion Muslims in the world, it may not matter whose side God is on. Continuing on this path, we may just eliminate all human beings from the planet, other species have become extinct before, and the rest of the planet might get along better without us anyway.

But it doesn't have to be like this. Jesus offers us a way to move beyond "us" and "them" thinking. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." As with all of these teachings from the Sermon on the Mount we have been considering, Jesus begins with an ancient teaching, only here he quotes both scripture and the commentary of his time.

We have read the words from Leviticus about loving neighbor, but the Torah does not explicitly say the faithful should hate their enemies. The Qumran Manual of Discipline (I,4,10) commands hate for all God has rejected, but this is not the same thing as hating our enemy and the command is not in the Hebrew Bible. So, what we have here is a case of Almost Bible, somewhat like, "God helps those who help themselves."

Still the people think they have as much a mandate to hate their enemy as they do to love their neighbor. And in this time of Roman occupation, it is clear who the primary enemy is. But Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

The ideal is that there is no "us" and "them," no division between neighbor and enemy because there is no enemy, but the reality is people

have divided themselves. So, this is where Jesus begins. His solution is to have us love our enemy, the other, whoever is not included in our circle; to love, not necessarily like; to act in the other's best interest, not necessarily have warm fuzzies about them; to pray for them, because it is a kind of action, and it is difficult to pray for someone for very long without our feelings about them changing in some way.

“You don't get to hate your enemy,” Jesus says, “You don't get to dehumanize the other. You don't get a free pass on anyone, because in the end, we are called to love everyone as God does. So, in the end, there is no ‘us’ and ‘them.’ We are all part of one human family.” The question is, “How do we do this?” Love may be the way beyond “us” and “them” thinking, but how do we love those we name as enemy?

We begin by getting to know them. It is difficult to love someone we don't know. It is easier to hold on to our caricatures, our hatred, our fear of the other, if we keep a distance. This is a part of why we have spent so much time building relationships with Jews and Muslims in our community, not that we begin with hatred and fear, though this may be more of a temptation with Muslims in this time, but to make sure we get to know real flesh-and-blood people with these identities.

Once we have shared an Iftar meal with Muslim friends, we can no longer lump together all Muslims as if they are like the small percentage of terrorists who distort Islam. And once they have broken bread with us, they can no longer lump together all Christians and Baptists with those who publicly denounce Islam. Getting to know people of another faith does away with false caricatures and it puts us in a position to do more than not hate. It puts us in a position to love. We'll have an opportunity to do more of this on Wednesday nights in March.

This is also why we are doing more with the other half of First Baptist Church, even though each half has diversity. Many assume that we have moved beyond issues of racial division in this country. But anyone who has paid attention to the national narrative about the relationship between law enforcement and minority communities knows this is not so. People of different races view these issues differently and in most conversations, we try to determine whether a person weighing in

is one of “us” or one of “them.” Getting past these differences hinges upon getting to know each other, really getting to know each other, suspending judgment and listening to other points of view.

These same principles apply to people across all the divides we construct. We have immigrant families in this church in addition to those CBF missionaries Marc and Kim Wyatt work with. No matter what our view on public policies, once we get to know specific strangers in our land, we aren’t able to hold on to caricatures. The same goes for those on the other side of our political and ideological loyalties. When we get to know real people of any stripe, we take a step toward love.

Loving the enemy begins with getting to know him/her. If there have been conflicts between individuals, groups or nations, we also need to address those conflicts in a redemptive way; that is, not by seeking revenge, but by practicing forgiveness and seeking reconciliation.

Jesus says in our reading today, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Elsewhere he tells Peter he must forgive the fellow church member who sins against him, forgive not just seven times, but seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22).”

In the first teaching, he presents a minimal bar, though a difficult one - that as his followers, we must not retaliate for any harm done to us. In the second, he goes further and commands us to forgive the person who has hurt us, even if he/she has done so over and over again. And to think – we hear readings like this and say, “Praise be to you, O Christ.”

But then, what is the practical alternative to forgiveness? On a national level, it is endless warfare. We can’t even the score because the parties will never agree upon who started the conflict and thus, when the score is even. On an individual level, we may get back at someone, but retaliation is never satisfying, revenge is never that sweet, except sometimes in sports... The only way to healing involves forgiveness.

Let me offer a couple illustrations. In this week’s “Monday Mornings” article from Gardner-Webb, Tracy Jessup tells a story about a family we may have read about. Gentry and Hadley Eddings lost two

young children in a traffic accident the May before last. Jessup decided to invite them to speak at Gardner-Webb but waited until they had time to heal. They spoke on February 8, but when he invited them, he had no way of knowing that a few weeks before the event, they would announce to their church that Hadley was pregnant with twins.

So, there was good news to mix with the challenging. And when a reporter asked them what they hoped the students would take away from their story, they referenced their experience of forgiving the truck driver who slammed into their car, killing their children. “Be willing to forgive others,” they said, “We know that has been an important part of our healing – just to be able to forgive the driver who caused the accident.” It is an amazing story, but it is a biblical truth – when there has been conflict, the only way to healing involves forgiveness.

A second illustration is found in the story of Corrie Ten Boom who was imprisoned at Ravensbruck during World War II because she and her family were helping refugees escape the Nazis. Her sister died there and Corrie was released due to a clerical error. After the war, when she was speaking to an audience about the transformative power of forgiveness, a man came up to her and asked if she could forgive him. He had been a guard at Ravensbruck. He had become Christian after the war and said he knew God’s forgiveness, but still asked for hers.

Corrie said she at first felt only anger, but then asked for God’s forgiveness and the ability to forgive him. She said God answered her prayer as she wrote in her book *The Hiding Place*, “And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself (p. 238).”

It is powerful reminder that forgiveness is a gift from God and one we all need. We all need a do-over like Adele got at the Grammys. We all mess up the notes of life. Since we do, we need to stand ready give others a second chance.

Loving the enemy begins with knowing the enemy and if conflict is involved, forgiveness is required. All I would add is that to move beyond the categories of “us” and “them” and love all people, we have

to want to. If we want to hold on to our divisions, we will. If don't really want to love "them," nothing can make us. Jonah went west when God told him to go east because he wasn't about to help the Ninevites, he didn't want "them" saved. He preferred to die in the belly of a fish and even when God dragged him kicking and screaming to Nineveh and the people repented, he went high up on a mountain hoping the see the city burn! My grandmother used to say that beauty may be only skin deep, but ugly is to the bone! Hatred of the other is an ugly thing...

I don't know how many conversations I have had with people who have decided that all Muslims are evil, even if they are not terrorists, and no amount of evidence can convince them otherwise. I don't know how many conversations I have had with people who have decided that all immigrants are lazy, dangerous and a drain on our economy, people who will take away our jobs. Again, no amount of evidence will convince them otherwise. If we are ever going to move past this kind of thinking, we have to be willing to move. If we are ever going to follow Jesus' teaching and love our enemy, we have to be willing to love.

The children's book *Smoky Night* tells the story of two families trying to find shelter during the riots in Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict in 1992. One family is African-American, the other Korean-American. They come from communities at odds with each other and they don't seem willing to get past their "us" and "them" thinking, even during this crisis, until two cats, one from each family, are found together in a burning building. After they are rescued by a fireman, they share a bowl of milk in front of both families, and the fireman says that when he found them, they were holding paws.

At this point the wall between these families begins to fall. Their differences of culture don't matter anymore. What they share is much more important. Something good has come out of a terrible night.

We can pray that something good will come out of the experiences that divide us. And we can pray for the people we struggle most to love, as Jesus commands us. The healing of the world hinges not on us, but on God. So, prayer is needed. Maybe if we pray long enough, we will finally get over ourselves and begin to love as Christ has called us.