

WGUMC February 19, 2017 "We have seen the enemy..."
Matthew 5:38-48 and 7:1-5, 12, 24-28

One of my favorite ways to pray is to "pray the psalms."

What I like to do is start reading a psalm slowly and after each verse stop and then translate it into my own words so that I can hear the truth of the psalm in my own life.

The only trouble I run into using this method is when I get to one of the many verses that talks about enemies and what should be done to them. The worst one is Psalm 137 and it's about the Babylonians: "Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" [137:8-9]

I can hardly read that one, let alone pray it. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy, that is, if I had one. I've always figured that the easiest way to love your enemy is not to have any, and I like to think that I don't have any. But that really lets me off the hook too easily. This passage about loving your

enemy is one of the hardest teachings in the whole Bible and we can't make it easy just by saying that it doesn't apply to us.

I may not think that I have enemies but I would be naïve to think that I am not capable of being someone else's enemy. After all, I am an American, and a whole lot of people in the world regard America as their enemy. I am also a Christian and many people in this country regard Christians as the enemy because they think we are all self-righteousness, narrow-minded and hypocritical. Of course, I am Caucasian which means that I was born with all sorts of privileges and advantages. I benefit from a system that discriminates against people of color, and so that puts me in league with the enemy. Not only that, but I have too much education and I live in California. I guess that makes me one of those "coastal elites," who some regard as the enemy.

But I am not just an enemy. I learned that I am a cohort of The Enemy. A year ago, I preached a sermon about how Jesus

is viewed in Islam. Hank's boss heard it and asked if she could post it on an interfaith website called *Patheos*. She did and someone responded with a comment comparing me to the Anti-Christ. Apparently, just trying to understand my Muslim brothers and sisters made me the world's enemy.

I didn't take offense. I'd just say this person doesn't really know me. But a lot of folks can't see past the labels and so every day can feel like Judgment Day. Someone somewhere is judging us, and it's awfully tempting to judge them right back.

The internet makes it easy to strike back. Last week, the *Mercury News* reported on a study of internet trolls, those people who make mean, crude or threatening comments on other peoples' thoughts posted on the web. We assume that these trolls are twisted human beings who are full of fear and hate and need somewhere to put it. But a study by researchers at Stanford and Cornell found that the average internet troll "is

probably someone like you, who's having a bad day." [Michael Bernstein, professor of computer science at Stanford, quoted in the *Mercury News*, Feb. 8, 2017]

In other words, Trolls R'Us. We've had another confrontation with our boss, it's late at night, we can't sleep and so we scroll through Facebook or our twitter feed and surprise, surprise, we find something offensive and we can't help ourselves. As the old camp song goes, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." All it takes is one cranky person to start a brushfire of abuse that can burn through the wilderness of the web.

On the internet, it's an eye for an eye until the whole world is blind. So it's time to get back to the Sermon on the Mount. It's time to learn how to turn the other cheek, leave the page, put down the phone, and go play with the dog. Remember, that anonymous person making that nasty comment is not anonymous to God. And God loves them

anyway. You have to consider the possibility that they are just having a bad day.

You never know, which is why Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Those words may seem impossible to follow because we make judgments all the time. So the important thing to remember is that there are two meanings of the word "judgment." One is good and one is bad. There, I just made a judgment. When we choose what is right for us, what aligns with our values, what accords with God's will, then we are using our good judgment. We call this "discernment," and without it, we cannot live a moral life.

But there is another meaning of the word "judgment." That's when we judge others out of our need to feel superior to them. When we try to boost our own ego by tearing down someone else, that is bad judgment. Richard Rohr says, "That type of judgment is not of God...[it] seldom leads to deeper insight or compassion. It's another way of eating of the tree of

knowledge of good and evil and gaining a false sense of security or moral high ground." [Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for A New World*, 162]

Jesus says that when we judge others, we focus on the speck in their eye without seeing the log in our own. Your therapist has a different way of putting it: we have a tendency to deny our own shadow by projecting it onto someone else. So Jesus and Carl Jung are really saying the same thing: there is something that we don't like about ourselves and instead of owning up to it, we blame someone else. [Rohr, 162-3]

Richard Rohr says: "...the enemy always carries the dark side of your own soul. Normally those people who threaten us carry our own faults in a different form. The people who really turn you off are very much like you." [Rohr, 157]

That makes me think that the hardest enemy to love is the one we find inside of us. As the saying from the old cartoon goes: "We have seen the enemy and they are us." And

so our biggest challenge is not learning how to love that anonymous enemy on the internet, but how to love the one we know best, the one that trolls in our own soul. This is the one that makes us drink too much or eat too much, the one that holds on to hurts too long or takes offense too easily, the one that is always comparing us to someone else or measuring us against some impossible standard, the one that keeps score every time we screw up or is forever playing our parent tapes back to us.

You know who I'm talking about. This is the enemy that holds God off and won't let God's love in. This is the enemy that says to us, "You don't deserve to be loved." But this is the enemy that God wants to love to death or at least to silence so that we can hear what God is saying to us, "...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." [Isaiah 43:4]

If we would only take the risk of receiving that love, we could begin to love the enemy within. And once the enemy inside us is feeling loved, the enemies outside become so much easier to love. We can even, by God's grace, become perfect in love.

After telling us to love our enemies, Jesus says, "Be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect." But perfection here doesn't mean being without error or without fault. What Jesus is getting at is a concept of a love that is without limits. The New English Bible translates the passage this way: "There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds." And the Common English Bible says, "Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete." [Matthew 5:48]

That still sounds like an impossible task, but John Wesley says that all of God's commands are covered promises. By that

he means that God doesn't ask us to do anything that God doesn't give us the grace and power to do. So if you can believe that God really does love you, there is nothing that your love cannot do. This is the solid rock on which we stand. Hate builds a house on sand. And though it seems that that house is growing taller and stronger by the day, I am confident that love will rain hard on that house, grace will flood it, and the Holy Spirit will blow it down. And, as they say, great will be the fall of it! Thanks be to God.