

Love Your Enemies, Part 1

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Matthew 5:43-46

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When I was ten, I kept a top-secret diary. It had a lock and key, the key being attached to the lock by a little chain. Not the most secure system, I admit.

I wasn't a disciplined diarist. I mostly took to journaling when swept up in some passionate emotion: anxiety about the first day of school, excitement about a trip to visit my sisters, and anger at some injustice, real or perceived.

One entry is entitled simply, "List of People I Hate."

Do you want to hear who was on it?

1. Saddam Hussein.
2. President George H.W. Bush.
3. A bully at school.
4. My ex best friend.
5. My math teacher.

So, a little context.

It was 1991 and, of course, we were in the midst of the First Gulf War. I didn't understand much about the situation in the Middle East, except that Saddam Hussein was the bad guy. Nor did I have much awareness of George H.W. Bush, except I knew that my parents had voted for Dukakis.

But it felt appropriate that these two global leaders should be at the top of my hate list, because I knew that I didn't like war.

The bully at school tormented me and others on a daily basis. A vicious, angry kid who seemed to sense fear and pounce on it.

The ex best friend was a girl with whom I'd had a falling out. Before we stopped talking to each other, she'd been my anchor at school, my go-to companion at lunch and recess. I felt lost without her.

And my math teacher—well. Let's just say math wasn't my best subject, and while I really didn't *hate* that guy, I suspected he took pleasure in confounding me with his worksheets and tests.

But why did I write that list? Why go to the effort of it?

I'm quite sure I'm not the only child ever to do so.

Looking back, I think it was about power. Specifically, my lack of power and my feelings about that.

See, I was a *child*. A child with a growing awareness of the world around me. NPR was often playing in the background at my house, and I was beginning to grasp, on some level, that there was far more violence in the world than I had ever known in my cloistered existence in a small academic town in New Hampshire.

And while my immediate world was very safe in many ways, I was also fast approaching adolescence. And I knew, on some level, that this was bad news for me. I hadn't come

out yet—I was a long way from doing that—but I did sense that I was different, and it seemed like my peers were sensing it too. And that scared me. A lot.

So maybe my hate list was an effort, on some level, to exert some control over the growing chaos of the world. There was something almost ritualistic about making a private record of my enemies.

As if by writing down their names, I could curse them.

As if my hatred, even if it was never openly expressed, might creep out into the universe and undermine them, hurt them in some way, leaving me avenged yet blameless.

Of course that's fantasy, a child's magical thinking. But it can't be denied: hate is a powerful feeling. A tempting feeling. An easy feeling, one that you can slip into like a comfortable sweater.

In his beautiful book, *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin wrote, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."

I thought, naively, that as I grew into adulthood, that I'd be less tempted to cling to hate. That I'd be able to face pain and deal with it, without looking for enemies. But that's not what's happened. The stakes have gotten higher. It turns out that as you grow, so does your pain. Or at least, pain takes on a new complexity and intensity.

I'm no longer concerned about everyday enemies like schoolyard bullies or mean girls.

No, I'm worried about North Korea and terrorists of all backgrounds, including angry, armed white men.

I'm worried about political corruption, abuse of power, and the dismantling of our social safety net.

I'm worried about the physical and spiritual safety of immigrants, people of color, and the LGBTQ community—including myself and my partner.

So many threats. So much pain.

“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.”

What is Jesus saying here?

I think sometimes these words are invoked as a means of denying conflict, or to suggest that conflict could be easily resolved if we all just learned to get along. If we just let go. If everyone just calmed down. If we could agree to disagree.

I think all that is true to a point. But I would like to suggest that Jesus was not an “agree to disagree” kind of person—not when it came to the essentials of his message. Remember those greatest commandments? Love God and love neighbor? Well, Jesus didn't compromise on that. Ever.

Even when some in the crowd got upset. Even when others disdained him for breaking bread with social pariahs like tax collectors and lepers. Even when he attracted negative attention from temple priests and Roman leaders alike.

Remember, this charge to “Love your enemy” is attributed to a man who was *crucified* by his enemies.

Let it never be said that Jesus did not hold on tightly to his deepest values, his commitments, his faith.

And so I think we are called to do the same: hold tightly to our deepest values. We are called to love our enemies but *not* at the expense of ourselves and the things we hold dear.

Maybe we need to check our understanding of “love.” Maybe the love to which Jesus refers is not the same love we experience with family and friends. Such intimate love is a lot to ask of ourselves, especially in reference to people we find abusive or dangerous or hostile. But perhaps Jesus wants us to begin somewhere much simpler.

Again, James Baldwin provides some language that might help us. In an essay about reckoning with racism—both within us and around us—he wrote of the “necessity of love,” and said, “I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”

Think about that. *Love not as being made happy but love as a state of grace.*

What does that look like?

I think it might look like this:

A basic regard for humanity, in all its woundedness and messiness.

And deep faith that none of us is beyond redemption, that none of us is beyond the loving transformation of God.

And the willingness to admit that change is possible, that those we perceive as enemies can surprise us, can reveal themselves as more complicated and more *lovable* than we first thought.

Sometimes, I look at people who feel like enemies and I think, "I can't imagine how to love this person. I can't see how he and I could ever be reconciled in this lifetime."

And then I remember Hamlet's words to Horatio:

"There are more things in heaven and earth,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

In other words, thank God that God is bigger than my limited imagination. Thank God that God sees more than we ever do.

Maybe love is just leaving room for the possibility that God will help us do the work we don't know how to do.

Maybe love is simply trusting that God is more powerful than human hate, and that no list of enemies can compete with God's list of beloveds.

Maybe love is doing the work we *can* do here on earth, knowing that our perceptions are never the end of the story. There is always more story. That is the core message of the Good News of Jesus: that death does not have the final word.

And neither does hate. Amen.