

Matthew 5:38-48

We have no problem loving our neighbor as ourself, as long as we can pick our neighbors. We do not send valentines to everyone; just to those neighbors we like. Unless we're in Grade School and the teacher makes us put a valentine into every classmate's box. Anyone can love their friends. It does not take an act of God to love those who love you. But to be sons of God, says Jesus, you need to love your enemies. And this is where we struggle.

We probably don't even call them enemies; just people we do not like very much. We think our enemies are over in Afghanistan and Pakistan--small cells of radicals with guns, and they're planning their next act of terrorism against the United States. We would hardly refer to our nasty coworker as our enemy, or the mean kid at school, or that neighbor across the way who does things to irritate us. We mostly ignore such people. We try to avoid confrontations with them. We may not think of them as enemies, although we would not shed a tear if they packed up and moved far away from us.

But here is how Jesus puts it. We are to love our neighbor as ourself; everyone is our neighbor, including our enemies, including those people we do not care for, whom we shun and avoid. According to our Lord, therefore, you and I need to re-evaluate our concept of love.

The way we love, at present, is totally dependent upon what it is, or who it is that we love. We do not love every kind of food. The taste, the texture, the aroma determine which foods we love and which ones we despise. It's the same way with everything in life. Certain types of music we love, other types we do not care for. Clothing and shoes, perfumes and colognes, automobiles, movies...we know what we like and what we don't like, and it all has to do with the object of our affection--how it smells, how it performs, how it makes us feel.

With people, also, we love them or do not love them because of what they're like--how they live, talk, and think, what they think of us, how they make us feel. That's why we love our friends but despise our enemies. Our friends do things to make us love them; our enemies do things to irritate and anger us. If we are going to start loving our enemies, loving our neighbor as ourself, including our neighbors who irritate us, then our love can no longer be inspired by its object. We can no longer love some and hate others because of what they say and do.

I knew someone who did not have a sense of smell. I forget if it was a birth defect or if a disease caused it. To this man, all food tasted the same. There was no taste. If he closed his eyes he would have a hard time telling you what he was eating. That's how Jesus commands us to love our neighbors. With eyes and ears closed and holding our nose. This way, we love all people the same. We do not see what someone does and love them for it. We do not hear what another person says and hate them as a result. Only when we are blind and deaf to the actions and words of our neighbor, will we truly love our neighbor, including our enemy, as ourself.

But can it be done? Throughout the record of human history, it is clear to us that only one Man ever loved in this way. The Man who was rejected by His own people. The Man who was hated above all men. The Man who was despised and thrown outside the city to die on a cross. Jesus showed that He is the Son of the Heavenly Father because He loved His enemies; He prayed for those who persecuted Him. This is the nature of God. This is who He is.

Were God like us, He would not be a friend of sinners. Were God like us, He would look at how we sin each day and hate us for it. He would hear the gossip and lies spoken from our mouths and have

nothing to do with us. The way we treat God by despising His Commandments, were He like us, He would have sent us packing our bags for hell long ago.

But friend, God is not like us. We, however, want to be more like Him. Jesus' words of our text where He says turn your cheek to those who slap you, give your cloak to those who take your tunic, go two miles for him who makes you go one mile; where He says love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...all these words of Jesus do not describe us at all, but they do describe Him.

The soldiers received Jesus with slaps to His face, and He did not defend Himself. The soldiers took His clothing and for His seamless tunic they cast lots. The soldiers forced Him to walk the road to the cross. Did Jesus hate them for it? Did He despise them in His heart? He prayed for them. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He did not hate these men who were acting as His enemies. He died out of love for them.

The good news for us is that though we were, at one time, enemies of God, God does not hate His enemies...He loves them. God closes His eyes and ears to all the sin in our life. He holds His nose and does not smell the stench of our wickedness. Why? Because Jesus closed His eyes in death for you. Jesus died for every sinner, including you, and His Heavenly Father, therefore, declares all sin forgiven. God fixes His eyes, not upon the disobedience in your life, but upon His Son on the cross, and all your disobedience, whatever it is, He forgives. It may surprise you to hear this, but God does not love you because of anything that you do; He loves you because of Jesus, because He died for you. God has no enemies, therefore, because Jesus died for all sinners--even those who hate Him. He has no sense of smell when it comes to people. He loves all people the same. God loves you and He loves the enemies in your life. He gives good things to you and to them. He did not give a valentine only to a select few; Jesus' heart poured out its blood for everyone.

Now friends listen to this, there may be people in your life whom you do not like, but Jesus loves them. And if you are a son or daughter of the Heavenly Father, then Jesus lives in you and He will love them through you. We do not love our enemies so well, but Jesus does. And so because He lives within you as His baptized child, your love will be inspired by His love. We are very selfish with our love; but not Jesus. And so because He dwells within you entering you through His flesh and blood of His Sacrament, His love will reflect itself in your love.

As Jesus lives within you, because He has no enemies, neither will you. You will forgive those who hurt you. You will be merciful to those who are unkind to you. You will pray for those who act like enemies toward you. To do these things is to show the world that you are a Christian; that you live in God's forgiveness, and that Jesus lives in you. Amen.