

Sister Monica Clare – Sermon for the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin on Feb. 20, 2022

When Father Smith asked me to preach here at Saint Mary's, he sent me a few options on the calendar. I got back to him and I said "I'm going to have to choose the Sunday with that Gospel about loving your enemies because I'm pretty sure God wants me to work on that." I would expect that a few of you might feel the same way, so let's work on it.

First of all, a couple of definitions:

Number 1: What does Jesus mean by love? Jesus is talking here about agape. A love for all humankind in which we exercise compassion and we take care of each other.

Definition number 2: Who is our enemy? According to agape – nobody is. But according to our limited human understanding, we think of an enemy as:

- That person at work, or within our own family, who seems to have it in for us
- Someone that we're afraid of.
- An enemy, in our understanding, can also be a foreign country with unfamiliar customs and beliefs that seem to threaten our way of life
- Or we can see the enemy as a group of people in our own country who, in our opinion, embrace a harmful ideology.

I don't know about you, but I sometimes go to that uncharitable place where I wish the enemy would simply disappear. If I could only subtract the enemy from the equation, I think, everything would be better. If only that person, or those people, I think sinfully in my heart, would go away – we would all be better off.

And yet God does not subtract our enemies from the equation. We can change jobs, alienate family members, move to another country, but everywhere we go, we continue to encounter those that we consider to be our enemies. They will never, in this earthly plane of existence, ever go away.

And so God tells us – our enemies are here to stay, and we have to learn to love them.

So how do we do that?

The good news is, Jesus is not telling us to be doormats, or to agree with everything other people say, or to fail to hold people accountable for harmful actions or ideologies. People who love each other can still disagree and hold each other accountable. In fact, conflict within a loving relationship is actually necessary because it moves the relationship forward. We can still argue. But we must do so in a non-destructive way in order to preserve a loving relationship with our fellow human beings. Jesus, in this text, is calling us to do just that.

Psalm 37, which we also heard today, gives us another way to love our enemies in its paradoxical set of instructions that foreshadows the teachings of Jesus:

It tells us to focus on our behaviors, and our lives, rather than dwelling on our enemies. This must have sounded upside down and backwards to audiences in the Ancient Near East, who had been taught all their lives that to conquer and extinguish their enemies – to subtract them from the equation - was not only acceptable, it was holy. Who was this upside-down God who asked them to take their focus off the enemy and instead put it into the work of building up loving kindness in their own lives?

In modern language, we would say the Psalmist is telling people here to de-escalate – don't throw kerosene on the fire. Instead, try to extinguish the fire. Add to the energy of love and compassion in your own life instead of stoking the fires of anger and hatred with your enemies. Verse 9 says “Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil.” Don't feed those furnaces of negativity by adding your own fuel. Instead focus on nurturing and cultivating the vast orchards of love and goodness. This exhortation seems counter-intuitive, but to anyone who deals with conflict resolution it makes perfect sense because it WORKS. Conflicts are resolved by listening instead of screaming, by problem-solving instead of raging, by diplomacy instead of war.

God reminds us in these texts that it is not our job to pass judgment and exact punishment on our fellow human beings. Our only job is to follow God and love one another, and God will take care of the rest.

But what if we can't just ignore our enemies? What if they're in our face, in our workplace, on our television screens and we can't look away? Then it would seem that God is calling us to deal with them in the context of love and compassion.

One way to do that, according to Christ, is to see our enemies as human beings instead of vilifying them into 1-dimensional cartoon villains. Instead of applying those 1-dimensional nicknames or labels such as “idiot,” or “monster,” Christ calls us to regard them as fully human. Name-calling removes a person's humanity by identifying them with only ONE quality instead seeing them as multi-dimensional human being – a human being who is as deeply beloved by God as we are.

Another way we can avoid dehumanizing our enemies is to listen to them – to learn their stories and their point of view thoroughly. Find the common ground that lies outside the area of

differences. Maya Angelou wisely said: “It is very hard to hate someone if you look them in the eye and recognize them as a human being.” And Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminded us that “All of our humanity is dependent upon recognizing the humanity in others.”

When we ignore the humanity of those who are different, those with whom we disagree, and those we perceive as a threat, we ignore the possibility of loving them. If we separate our enemies from their humanity, we are lost. Until we learn to work together to solve the problems of this world, we are wandering hopelessly in a trackless waste.

God calls us to love one another, not to destroy one another, or subtract one another from the equation. We are called by our creator to learn to work together because, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”