

Love Your Enemies (yes, even them)

Matthew 5:38-48

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

February 12, 2023

Pastor John Klawiter, Preaching

Grace and peace to you my siblings in Christ,

At our council retreat in January, we were getting to know each other and reflecting on what is important to us.

One of the men said he'd just started reading a book called "**Love Your Enemies.**" (pic of Brooks)

He was sick of all of the negativity around politics and this book got his attention—is there another way? Is there a way to treat each other, especially in our political climate, that allows each of us to stay true to our beliefs and understand our neighbor who won't radically change their beliefs. It's not about neutrality or "can't we all just get along." It's more like "disagreeing gracefully."

The author, Arthur Brooks, attempts to explain how decent citizens can save our society from the culture of contempt—hatred of our neighbors.

When Jesus says to love your enemies, he means the same thing.

Our misconceptions about Jesus might put him in the box of peace-loving hippie who just wants everyone to get along. That's not quite right.

If anyone ever asks you what would Jesus do...

Remind them that flipping over tables and chasing people with a whip is within the realm of possibilities.

Jesus has emotions. He's not telling his followers to be pushovers.

The sermon from Jesus today, remember, is part of a larger message. It's a message that began with a blessing—you, people who've never been blessed, are a blessing.

Then, You ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world.

The people are told this with the backdrop of many obstacles and enemies.

New Testament theologian NT Wright talks about how dangerous this world is:

“pagan nations have overrun the land and made the people subject to harsh rules and taxes. There are just as many dangers within, as movements of national resistance spring up, fueled by anger at the increasing injustice and wickedness within Jewish society with a few becoming very rich and the majority being poor, some very poor.”

Wright asks, “how did Jesus’ kingdom message apply to them and does it apply today?”

Well, we hear the old justice—eye for an eye; tooth for a tooth.

This isn’t that foreign to us—just watching my youngest kids try to play together, if one gets hurt by another, it doesn’t matter if it was an accident, the retributive justice is fast—they want the other sibling to experience the same pain!

Thank God they grow out of that phase.

Christ takes his new philosophy to an extreme.

It’s better to have no vengeance at all. But to have a creative way forward reflecting the patient love of God who wants Israel to shine God’s light into the whole world so that all people will see that this is the one true God.

So, how does that play out?

If you are struck on the cheek, offer up the other.

If someone sues you for your coat, give your cloak too.

And if a soldier asks you to carry their stuff for a mile, which they have the right to do, keep going another mile.

This isn’t an invitation for everyone to walk all over us. This isn’t about not standing up for ourselves. Context matters—in a land of Roman occupation, retaliation isn’t advised... but Jesus suggests going further—if these injustices are done, give the enemy extra.

Wright says **“copy your generous God!”**

What if they surprise the soldier with the news that there is a different way to be human—a way that doesn’t plot revenge? Think the soldier might be surprised by this response?

Wright suggests that Jesus uses these examples of sketches of how to behave no matter what situation you’re in—what would it mean to reflect God’s generous love despite the pressure and provocation, or our own anger and frustration?

It feels like our ability to be civil with one another is dwindling away. Kindness and compassion are rare traits to witness anymore on a national scale—are we losing these traits in our communities?

When the book suggestion about “love your enemies” was offered up, I was already in the mindset ready to engage that conversation. I ordered the book right away.

One of my favorite bits of advice that Brooks offers up is in regards to engaging with respect with someone you see differently. **“No one is ever insulted into agreement.” (picture from Congress)**

Call me names or question my identity and see if I will come over to your side. It doesn’t work.

So... does Brooks have a solution?

He actually has 5. These are his 5 Rules to stand up to the Culture of Contempt:

1. Stand up to the Man. Refuse to be used by the Powerful

Be careful getting sucked into the voices that echoes everything you *want* to hear. He suggests how to check our biases. Tune out, or at least listen to those voices in moderation. “Unless the person is actually teaching you something or expanding your worldview and moral outlook, you are being used.”

2. Escape the bubble. Go where you’re not invited and say things people don’t expect.

Try listening to other voices—find those sources that can look critically at the bigger picture and speak truth. Do you have friendships with people who have a

different point of view? Seeking those people out will help you understand others better.

3. Say no to contempt. Treat others with love and respect, even when it's difficult.

Probably the hardest. No insults. No mockery. No breaking the 8th commandment—bear false witness!

Don't do it. Even if the person DESERVES it! It might feel good in the moment, but it won't bring about understanding. People can be persuaded to see the truth, but not if they are told they're trash and worthless.

4. Disagree better. Be part of a healthy competition of ideas.

Brooks is “pro-disagreement”. Disagreement is good. Conflict is healthy. Competition breeds excellence.

“Disagreement helps us innovate, improve, correct, and find the truth.” Engage in earnest debate while still treating everyone with love and respect.

5. Tune out: Disconnect more from the unproductive debates.

Selectivity and rationing are the keys. Resolve to pay attention to ideas, not just politics or blanket agreement with who you think you're supposed to.

Brooks then did something remarkable. He compared this work—of loving our enemies—as entering the mission field.

We have found what is good and true, but when we leave this sanctuary or our homes or places of work, we enter a mission field. We have the privilege of sharing our message with joy, confidence, and love.

“You know what our world needs: more love, less contempt!”

It begins with us. We can do this.

The sermon on the mount isn't about what we can do. It's about Jesus. This was the blueprint he followed.

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

If this is about us, good luck. Jesus isn't asking us to be perfect—Jesus became that perfection and righteousness for **us on the cross**.

But that doesn't mean we don't have any skin in the game.

Be like Christ—follow his lead.

I love how NT Wright ties this all together:

“When they struck him, he took the pain. When they put the worst Roman equipment on his back—the cross—he carried it to his own execution. When they nailed him to it, he prayed for them.”

Jesus asks nothing from his followers that he hasn't faced himself.

He faces that cross. It's a perfect love. We love our enemies—even the ones that put him to death—and the ones we walk alongside daily.

We can't be perfect. We'll make mistakes, even when we try to show more care and compassion to our neighbors, we trip up.

We'll be messy on the outside, but what does Jesus ask of us, in our hearts????

Copy the love of our generous God. Amen