

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48

There's a great scene at the end of Die Hard. The villain, Hans Gruber, is dangling from the edge of a skyscraper, when all of a sudden Bruce Willis overcomes the animosity he's felt for his adversary, he reaches down, and pulls him up, saves him from oblivion. Subsequently, Gruber is rehabilitated and becomes a cherished member of the community. No, is that not it goes? (For those of you who haven't seen the movie, that's not how it goes.)

I bring this up just to point out how counter-cultural Jesus' message in this passage is. I mean, think about the lessons we learn every day about how to deal with enemies. From superhero stories, action flicks, horror movies, we learn to revel in the utter and total destruction of our adversaries. Even in how we talk about history, we tell tales about how good overcame and defeated evil. Ground it into dust. Finished. Kaput. So, *love* your enemies? C'mon. It's one of those passages that you listen to and say "Okay, Jesus. Suuuure." Love your family? Totally. Friends? Of course. Neighbor? Sure. But your enemy? It seems almost to be a contradiction in terms. After all, if you really loved them, they wouldn't be your enemy, would they? And that's certainly how some people have interpreted this passage. That, if you're simply able to extend love towards those for whom you'd previously felt animosity, your relationship with them will simply be transformed by that love. *Poof*. But, I think that's a somewhat naïve reading of this passage. And, frankly, I don't actually think that's what Jesus is getting at here. In Jesus' time, as in our own, there are people for whom it's unlikely we're ever going to feel much affection. People who behave in ways that violate our most cherished values. People who, no matter how hard we try, we can't bring ourselves to love, at least not in the sentimental sense of the word. I

think, ultimately, Jesus' admonition to love gets at something far deeper than simple sentimentality.

It's something I've been thinking about a lot recently. Particularly because, in our present political climate, the message I hear most frequently is a call to hate my enemies. Our discourse has become so vitriolic and extreme, it seems the only recourse available is to cluster together with likeminded citizens, bonded by our shared antipathy for the *other side*. And I get it, I really do. Truly reprehensible and dangerous ideas surface on a daily basis. Fearmongering, xenophobia, racism run rampant. It's tough to remain sanguine when a torch wielding mob of white supremacists marches on a city. If ever there was a time to hate, now's the time. And yet, there's Jesus. Same message as always. Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.

Clearly, I needed some help. So I turned to prophetic voices, speaking from the last time our nation found itself embroiled by such vitriol. Some of you were alive during the Civil Rights era, but I've always had to make do with hearing its stories and lessons second-hand. And, one of the things that's always confused me was how folks like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin, facing the kind of bigotry and hatred they confronted, how they could echo Jesus' call to love your enemies. Surely, if they could overcome the urge to hate those who spewed venom and sprayed firehoses, we can resist hatred's contemporary siren call.

In Martin Luther King Jr.'s seminal sermon on the topic, "Loving Your Enemies", King is honest about the deep challenge this presents. "I am certain Jesus understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one's enemy. He never joined the ranks of those who talk glibly about the easiness of moral life," King writes. Moreover, King is clear that the call to love one's enemies does not mean turning a blind eye to egregious behavior. "Forgiveness," he says, "does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier," to forming a relationship with that person. What King astutely notes is that hatred, by its very nature, drives an ever-deeper wedge between ourselves and the object of our hate. It may feel righteous, or frankly even feel good, to hate those who we believe have done evil, but if we give in to that urge we forego any future possibility to redeem and heal that rift. "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate," King writes, "adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars."

On top of the way that hatred poisons the future of our relations, King also observes the damage that hatred wreaks on our own heart. "Hate scars the soul and distorts the personality," he says. James Baldwin echoes this sentiment in his memoir *The Fire Next Time*. He observes how, every day we can see the effects of hatred, and the "spiritual wasteland to which that road leads. It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp," he says, "*Whoever debases others is debasing himself*. That is not a mystical statement but a most realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff." Indeed, Baldwin is explicit that his conviction to resist the urge to hate lies as much in self-preservation as it does in any higher moral value. "Time and time and time again," he writes, "the people discover that they

have merely betrayed themselves into the hands of yet another Pharaoh, who, since he was necessary to put the broken country together, will not let them go. Perhaps, people being the conundrums that they are, and having so little desire to shoulder the burden of their lives, this is what will always happen. But at the bottom of my heart, I do not believe this. I think that people can be better than that, and I know that people can be better than what they are.”

Baldwin cleverly notes that, when we return hate for hate, too often we become that which we despise. And, by giving in to this temptation, we forego any possibility of a loving future.

Taken together, Baldwin and King explain the rationale behind Jesus’ exhortation and lay down a roadmap for how we might follow it. Ultimately, I believe that Jesus calls us to love our enemies because love is the only means by which we can bring about true, lasting change. Rooting conflict in a spirit of love is the only way to avoid the corrosive effect of hatred on our relationships and our souls.

So, what does this love look like? Well, it’s certainly not averting difficult conversation, avoiding the tensions and conflicts that stir our deeper passions. It also doesn’t look like hedging behind moral ambiguity and equivocation when our nation needs to clearly and plainly condemn evil and racist ideologies. The last facebook message that Heather Heyer, the young woman who died in Charlottesville, posted was “if you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” So, feel that outrage. Channel it into action.

When I had him in class, one of Cornel West’s favorite, go-to phrases was “tenderness is what love looks like in private, and justice is what love looks like in public.” No ethic that spurns

the call to fight for a more just world can be meaningfully labeled as “love.” Given the events of this week I would be remiss not to note that this means white people speaking openly and honestly to other white people about the evils of racism. All too often, racially tinged comments — or even outright racist statements or acts — are patched over with an awkward silence, because it’s uncomfortable to challenge friends, coworkers, or family members and say “you know what, that was actually a pretty racist thing you just said.” This aversion to conflict is part of what provides racism and white supremacy the oxygen it needs to grow and thrive. If it wasn’t clear before, the events of Charlottesville should make plain that white communities are not doing a good enough job of stamping out hatred in our midst. Love means respecting people enough to be honest about our deepest disagreements, we must engage and not let pass those moments that allow bigotry to continue drawing breath.

And yet, that same call to love means that we cannot use these disagreements, no matter how fundamental, as a reason to deny the full humanity of those with whom we disagree. It means, instead of the simple act of writing off someone we believe to be racist, sexist, or otherwise reprehensible, we must engage in the hard work of entering full community with that person. Only by holding each other closely in love can we begin to heal the widening breach that’s rapidly engulfing our country.

We must try, however imperfectly, to love our enemies. Is this easy? No. Real love is hard. But, to recall the words of Dr. King, Jesus was never one who talked “glibly about the easiness of moral life.” Simple sentimentality never was his thing.

