

Isaiah 2:1-5

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: ²In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

³Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

⁵Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus said...

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

⁴⁴But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶***If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?*** ⁴⁷***And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?*** ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

INTRODUCTION

Today we begin a series of messages that will likely take us through the summer. The focus of this series will be on questions Jesus asks. Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher. Every good teacher asks good questions; questions that are thought provoking and that challenge the learners' presumptions. Someone took the time to count the number of questions that Jesus asked, Over 300! But interestingly, Jesus did not answer most of the questions he asked. Rather, Jesus left that to the listener. Often in addition to raising very challenging questions, Jesus would

use those as diving boards, if you will, to launch into a body of teaching which might give the listener a basis for forming one's own answer to the question.

Let me say here at the starting gate that I do not have all the answers...far from it. I too am a learner/disciple, just as you are. I trust that we can struggle together and grow in our pursuit of "perfection".

Love Your Enemies—Matt. 5:38-42 from The Message

³⁸⁻⁴²“Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

⁴³⁻⁴⁷“You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

⁴⁸“In a word, what I'm saying is, *Grow up*. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

[PRAY]

Jay Leno tells about a time when he pulled up to a stop light and noticed that the car ahead of him had a “HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS” bumper sticker. Jay said: “I like that, so I gave the guy a toot on my horn. Next thing I know, the driver rolls down his window, stuck his head out and shouted at me: ‘The light is still red, you moron!’” So much for loving Jesus! Or for that matter, for loving your fellow driver!

In this portion of the so-called Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus raising the following questions: ⁴⁶***If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?*** ⁴⁷***And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?***

Given the context, more questions arise:

**What is the nature of love? Who is my neighbor? Who is my enemy?
And, if we are “children of our Heavenly father”, how then shall we love?**

Lots of questions!

I want to start with the last one, first.

If we are “children of our Heavenly Father”, how then shall we love? Recently my sister and I spent a significant amount of time sorting through several boxes of photos from our mother’s side of the family. Some of the photos were faded, nondescript. Some were formal portraits. Some included inscriptions on the back, and if we were lucky we found names, dates and perhaps a place listed. But numerous photos had none of that, so we were left to our own devices to try and figure out who was who. Alas, that meant that some of the photos were tossed into the discard pile.

At one point I picked up a discolored photo of an ordinary woman wearing a plain dress, sitting on the steps of a porch by herself. No distinguishing features at all. But I held the photo up next to my face and asked my sister: “Do you see any family resemblance?”

If we are indeed, “children of our heavenly Father”, then we shall bear a family resemblance to God our Father, and Christ our brother! The resemblance will not be physical, but will be reflected in our character and our behavior—in how we live our lives, day in and day out, and most especially, in how we love!

The primary characteristic of the God we worship, is LOVE. The Greek language has several words that when translated into English, all translate as the word “love”, however the meanings vary greatly. In this instance, Jesus uses the word “agape” which is the highest, purest form of unconditional, self-sacrificing love!

What?!?!

We are to love one another as Christ has loved us, with this highest, purest, unconditional, self-sacrificing love! Yes! Most of us would agree that this is our intent, our goal, most especially with our immediate family: our parents and siblings, our spouses, children, and grandchildren.

But Jesus raises the bar and the issue when he says we should love our neighbors too! The question arises of course, **who is our neighbor?**

We know Jesus did not limit “neighbor” to the person(s) living on our street. In response to this question, Jesus told the story of the “Good Samaritan”. This is an oxymoron because to Jesus’ Jewish listeners, the words “good” and “Samaritan” were mutually exclusive! There was nothing good about a Samaritan, and in fact Jews and Samaritans were enemies! Ah...that radical rabble rouser Jesus has “...gone from preachin’ to meddlin’!”

Jesus is asking too much! **It’s one thing to love our families, and to love our neighbors, but our enemies??** Let’s be honest. Sometimes it isn’t easy to love those closest to us. **When it comes to enemies, we would do well to “not hate”, right?** If there is a spectrum from total hate on one end, and Jesus’ self-sacrificing love on the other, we would do well to move the needle away from the hate end, toward the middle (not hating). Maybe we can “tolerate” our enemy? **But to love our enemies?** No possible way!

Jesus is the way...Jesus is our example and role model.

We are to treat our enemies—as Jesus did—with agape/love. This kind of love is NOT a warm, fuzzy feeling. In fact, it has nothing to do with emotion. Agape love has everything to do with a decision, a deliberate and conscious choice to treat others as Jesus would, regardless of what they do to us, regardless of how they treat us or insult us. In spite of their actions, we are called to a higher standard of agape love, to behave toward our enemies with good will.

This raises the question: **Who is my enemy?** (oh darn. Why did she have to go there??)

I read a story about a preacher who was preaching on forgiving one’s enemies and as he neared the end of the message, he asked the congregation “How many of you are willing to forgive your enemies?” Only about 50% of their hands went up. So he preached another twenty minutes and asked again. About 80% of the

hands went up, indicating that these would forgive their enemies. He preached on and finally there was one hold out. So the preacher invited elderly Mrs. Smith to come forward. “How old are you? And please tell us how you have managed to forgive all your enemies.”

Mrs. Smith proudly declared: “I’m 98 years old, and I’ve outlived all of them!” I suppose that’s one way to deal with one’s enemies, but I doubt that it is what Jesus had in mind!

Who are your enemy and mine?

How we answer that question depends, in part, on where we live. According to Open Doors International (as quoted in Christianity Today) the top eight countries in the world where Christians experience the greatest persecution are: North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Iraq and Iran. The reasons vary from Communist oppression in Korea, with Islamic extremism and ethnic nationalism being the driving force in 35 out of the top 50 countries where persecution of Christians is present. We need to pray for our sisters and brothers in these situations, and for their enemies.

But what about us? Who are your enemy and mine? I wonder if in order to call another an enemy, we must know them personally. If that is the case, we may be dealing with “frenemies”...that is “...a person or group that is friendly toward another because the relationship brings benefits, but there are underlying feelings of resentment or rivalry present.” (Dictionary.com)

Ok! Now, all of us can relate to that, can’t we?

Surely we have (or have had) a coworker who didn’t pull their weight, a neighbor who borrowed tools (or whatever) and returned them in lousy shape or not at all? We have a relative or close friend who votes either “red/blue” but whatever their choice, it is the opposite of ours and political conversations with them have the potential to verge on World War III?

“An eye for an eye” is an ancient teaching. It was an attempt to curb the cycle of violence, not encourage it. The limit is drawn at one, and it is personal, between two individuals. This was a way to keep hostility in check. But Jesus said no, it doesn’t go far enough!

Jesus gives us very clear instructions on how to relate to our enemies and our frenemies. Don't retaliate. Turn the other cheek. Live generously. Revenge belongs to God, not to us. (Romans 12:19)

Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. This liberates you and just might have an influence on the other. Prayer changes hearts, starting with the heart of the one who prays!

Martin Luther King, Jr. had personal experience in this regard, saying that if we do not learn to love our enemies, we shall become just like them. "Hate at any point is a cancer that gnaws away at the vital center of your life...hate destroys the hater as well as the hated. Love has the redemptive power to transform the world, beginning with you and me." (quoted by P.W. McLarty)

In essence, Jesus says, if your enemy/frenemy behaves like a jerk toward you, there's no reason to act like a jerk toward him/her! (Fr. James Martin, SJ, Huffington Post article)

⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Even atheists do that!

You have heard it said (is the old way of doing things), but I SAY TO YOU...!Jesus calls us to a higher standard of behaving/living and loving. Is it hard? Yes, but not impossible. God gives to us "the transformer", the Holy Spirit who can assist us in becoming better lovers, both for our friends, our neighbors, and yes, most especially our enemies/frenemies!

I want to close with some questions posed by Pastor Dan Clendennen, on his blog Journey with Jesus, as he reflects on this passage: "...who are the people that I sanctimoniously spurn as impure, unclean, dirty, contaminated, and, in my mind, far from God? How have I distorted the self-sacrificing, egalitarian love of God into self-serving, exclusionary elitism? What boundaries do I wrongly build because of my fears, or might I bravely shatter in the name of love?"

[Pray]