

**Sermon Preached February 23, 2014**  
**Year A, Epiphany 7 – Love your enemies**  
**St. John’s Episcopal Church**  
**Beverly Farms, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

There is a story, not a joke I am afraid, about a holy man who was engaged in his morning meditation. It was under a tree whose roots stretched out over the riverbank. During his meditation he noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion caught in the roots was about to drown. He crawled out on the roots and reached down to free the scorpion, but every time he did so, the scorpion struck back at him. An observer came along and said to the holy man, ‘Don't you know that’s a scorpion, and it’s in the nature of a scorpion to want to sting?’ To which the holy man replied, ‘That may well be, but it is my nature to save, and must I change my nature because the scorpion does not change its nature?’”<sup>1</sup>

In the heart of the Episcopal Baptism service is a series of vows that we make as a congregation, in a question and answer format. One of the questions asks, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” and we answer “I will, with God’s help.” The question relates directly to both the Old Testament and Gospel readings.

In Leviticus God says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And then in Matthew Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I

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<sup>1</sup> In "Context," Mary Marty retells a parable from the "Eye of the Needle" newsletter. From [Joseph B. Modica](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/enemies.htm). <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/enemies.htm>

say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Like last week, we are hearing the continuation of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is quoting the Old Testament Law and then taking it to its logical conclusion. He is saying that we must love our neighbors, certainly, but even more than that, we must love our enemies. He also mentions “turning the other cheek.”

Loving our enemies is a tall order. Sometimes it’s hard to even love our loved ones. I can get pretty testy when the kids are bickering.... And we may say that it’s easy for Jesus to love, I mean, he IS Jesus after all. But then we have to consider that he is preaching to Israelites who are living in an occupied land. The Romans had taken over and the native people are suffering under great oppression. They are looking for a Messiah to lead the armies and fight the Romans. A Messiah who would battle the oppressors. Instead they get Jesus who says “love your enemies.” This is a radical statement even 2,000 years ago. But Jesus is able to see that the only way to conquer evil is with good. The only way to conquer enemies is with love. This holds true for all times and for all people.

But the practice of loving our enemies and not responding with an eye-for-an-eye is something that while it seems counter-intuitive, actually has a history of working well. For instance, instead of using force and hatred, Ghandi used non-violent protest in India in the 1920s and 30s to bring about justice and social change. He once wrote, “wherever you are confronted with an opponent, conquer him with love... We can only win over the opponent by love, never by hate. Hate is the subtlest form of violence.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from ‘The Law of Love’ by M.K. Gandhi. <http://sfr-21.org/sources/lawoflove.html>

During this Black History Month it is especially important to remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who, in a sermon from 1963 entitled “Loving your Enemies” directly addressed this issue. Dr. King’s practice of non-violence and love of enemies in the face of dangers and oppression brought about the triumph of the civil rights movement here in the States.

I’d like to read a somewhat long quote from Dr. King’s sermon because he so eloquently discusses the need for loving our enemies.

“Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That’s why Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they’re mistreating you. Here’s the person who is a neighbor, and this person is doing something wrong to you and all of that. Just keep being friendly to that person. Keep loving them. Don’t do anything to embarrass them. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with bitterness because they’re mad because you love them like that. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love.

There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies."

"The relevance of what I have said to the crisis in race relations should be readily apparent. There will be no permanent solution to the race problem until oppressed men develop the capacity to love their enemies. .... Forced to live with ... shameful conditions, we are tempted to become bitter and to retaliate with a corresponding hate. But if this happens, the new order we seek will be little more than a duplicate of the old order. We must in strength and humility meet hate with love.

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"While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community. To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory."

Jesus said to love our enemies because that is what he did. He did not hate the Romans. He did not hate those who condemned him to death. He did not respond with violence. He stood up courageously for truth. He opposed evil. And when he was sent to the cross and death for his statements and actions he forgave those who sent him there. He loved to the end, even his enemies, and through that achieved new life for us all.

In a few minutes we will baptize little Priscilla and Desmond into the Body of Christ. They will become part of this community, which at its best lives out Jesus' admonition to love our neighbors and enemies. We will make our vows to see Christ in all people and live the life Jesus modeled. Fortunately, we don't have to go it alone. As we say, we can only do this "with God's help." God's grace will give us the courage and strength to live as Jesus asks. For it is only with God in Christ helping us that such a thing is possible.

When someone sees us loving our enemies and we are asked, "Why are you doing that? Why don't you retaliate against their attacks on you? Why don't you hate them?" We can answer like the holy man at the beginning of the story, "because it is in my nature as a Christian to love, and must I change my nature because my enemy does not change his nature?"

Amen.