

“Let’s ‘do’ love”

During my seminary years I met a young Mennonite father, who was heading towards a PhD in order to become a seminary professor. One day we were discussing Jesus’ teachings that are really difficult to accept, ones like “love your enemies” which appears in our Gospel text for today. The young man shared that he’d recently watched cartoons with his 3 year old son. After watching the bad guys being blown up, steamrolled and variously obliterated, the father told his son that “God LOVES enemies.” His little boy was flabbergasted. “I thought God was GOOD, Daddy,” he said. “If God loves enemies, then he must not be very nice.”

We don’t have to be three years old to have problems with the notion of God loving enemies. At the movies audiences cheer when the bad guys, who have been hideously torturing people, wielding power in noxious ways, are finally blown away in some wonderful cathartic blast. I confess, that though I don’t cheer out loud, there are times when I FEEL a joyful inward cheer as that blast occurs. We can’t understand how God loves bad guys. It just seems perverse to us.

Then, my friends, as Christians we are not only taught that GOD loves enemies, we’re told by Jesus that WE are to do likewise: “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.” Boy, this is tough. As William Barclay says, “There is no commandment of Jesus which has caused so much discussion and debate as the commandment to love our enemies.” He goes on, however, to point out we need to understand some things about the word “love” before we can obey this command.

In Greek (the original language of the New Testament) there are three words for love: *eran* (*eros*) which describes the love of lovers, *philean*, which is love for our near and dear ones (brotherly love), and *agapan* (*agape*), which is translated by Barclay in an entire paragraph:

“*Agapan* describes an active feeling of benevolence toward the other person; it means that no matter what that person does to us we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but his highest good; and we will deliberately and of set purpose go out of our way to be good and kind to him.... We

cannot love our enemies as we love our nearest and dearest. **To do so would be unnatural, impossible and even wrong.** (emphasis mine) But we can see to it that, no matter what a man does to us, even if he insults, ill-treats and injures us, we will seek nothing but his highest good.”

Another commentator, K. Elizabeth Rennie, seems to have a slightly different view. “When Jesus declares to his audience, ‘love your eneemies’” she writes, “this is just the beginning formulation that is immediately made specific and active. The ‘love’ Jesus calls for is not an emotional or sentimental attachment. This love is ACTIVELY oriented- it is ‘love’ only because it is actively pursuing good for the enemy. ‘Do good,’ Jesus commands. He doesn’t say, ‘think good thoughts or have good feelings’, but actually ‘do good to those who hate you.’”

Barclay seems to be talking about an INNER ATTITUDE of wanting only the highest good for an enemy. Rennie seems to be lifting up OUTWARD ACTIONS that pursue good for the enemy. But these aren’t contradictory and are implicit in the perspectives of both commentators. Our feelings lead us, in Barclay’s understanding, to “deliberately go out of our way to be good and kind” to an enemy. And Rennie says Jesus wants us to go beyond having good thoughts to actually do good to our enemies, but in actuality to do good of any kind will require that we have an inner attitude of WANTING good for those folks.

LOVING ENEMIES requires BOTH an inner attitude of wanting God’s best for them AND an outer display of actions that arise from that attitude. To obey Jesus we need to put love into ACTION, to make it real, to DO love. This contrasts with common perceptions about love- seeing it as some vapor-like misty thing we can never really quite get a hold of.

Jesus gives startling examples of putting love into action. If someone hits you on one cheek, turn the other cheek to him. If someone takes something from you like your coat, don’t prevent him from taking your sweater. If someone asks you to give him something, give it to him.

How can this be? If we really did this, there’d be no stopping the violent, the rapacious, the abusive, the greedy the folks who take, take and take with no qualms or stirrings of conscience! Is this the world Jesus would have us create?

I don't think so. The key is remembering the DUAL nature of "doing" love. BOTH need to be present: the **inner attitude** that desires the highest good for another accompanied by a **willingness to act** on that desire.

Sometimes we perform the action, but the inner attitude is wrong. Let me give you an example from my life. It's not one I'm proud of, but it's true. I was in high school and was arguing with my mother. We were face-to-face shouting. I said something disrespectful at one point- I don't remember the words but I was outrageously mouthy. My mom lost control; her hand shot out and she slapped me on the cheek. There was a sneaky stirring of evil inside me. I wasn't consciously aware of it, but I KNOW I KNEW it was nasty. With a sly little look, I calmly turned my head and said, "Here, Mom, you missed this one," and pointed to my cheek. "The Bible says we should turn the other cheek, so here, hit me again." My mother froze, enraged, yet paralyzed by my taunting. After a pause she whirled away and stalked out of the room.

So, how did I do? Did I love my enemy? Did I do what Jesus would want? Of course not! My inner attitude was poisonous! I didn't want GOOD for my mother; I wanted her to look bad! To feel ashamed! To be embarrassed! To squirm. Can you see how critical that inner attitude is?

What about a situation of domestic violence? If a family member strikes another, is the attacked supposed to turn the other cheek? Think about the inner attitudes that might lead one person in a family to accept abuse from another. Often the feeling is fear. Is that an attitude that wants God's best for the other? Of course not! The highest good for another is NEVER achieved by allowing him to destroy, harm, injure others. Wanting God's best for another leads us to do what might help that person become more like Christ. Accepting abuse will not lead to that at all.

In today's text Jesus also talks about how we do good to those who do good to us; we love those who love us. Jesus is teaching us that we're not supposed to let the goodness offered to us by others determine our behavior to THEM. This is maybe even wilder than his command to love our enemies. It appears that the behavior of others is NEVER what should shape our behavior to them. Jesus calls for a commitment to seek the highest good for ALL: friend, foe, ourselves.

Christian love does not call us to be doormats or punching bags. Christian love at times calls for “toughlove” that stands up and says “NO.” But Christian love is to be the motivator within us at all times, and cannot be merely something that lives inside us, but **MUST** be displayed and lived out every day.

It is hard to understand and live out the teachings of Jesus. We are imperfect beings. We make mistakes. But, you know, when I was ordained I had to answer this horrible question that comes from the founder of Methodism, John Wesley himself. We were asked, “Are you going on to perfection?” And we had to answer, “Yes.” We were even asked, “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” The answer to that one was “yes”, too. I answered, “Yes,” but with a great tumult and turmoil in my spirit.

It helps to know what Wesley meant when he said, “perfect”. Wesleyan “perfection” is perfection in loving—God, others, ourselves. As one Methodist once asked, “If we’re not moving towards perfection, where are we going?” We certainly want to **AIM** that **DIRECTION**, right? Wesley knew we’d never be perfect in anything else, but he believed we could be **MADE PERFECT** in our love. That helps me, too—you see, **WE** don’t make ourselves perfect in the way we love; we are **MADE** perfect by the Holy Spirit’s action, which we seek, permit and encourage.

So today, friends, I encourage you. Love. Let love live in your heart. See that the love in your heart is acted out—**DO** love, don’t just **FEEL** love. And may we all keep traveling in the right direction: towards being made perfect in love in this life. So may it be. Amen.