

“Loving Your Enemies”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 6, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 10:12-18

Matthew 5:43-48

Summer Worship Series: *A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our Neighbors, and Ourselves* – Week Fourteen

“Love your enemies.” We might be tempted to interpret such a plea as outdated; as something that belongs in Jesus’ day and not ours: one of those Bible verses that cannot stand the test of time because the distance between Jesus’ world and our own is an expanse not worth our time to traverse. Why on earth should you love your enemies? Why would Jesus ever ask this of us?

In the introduction of his 2009 book entitled, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Christian ethicist and philosopher James K. A. Smith offers this thought experiment: to compare and contrast the ritual of coming the church with a visit to your local mall: to think about the similarities you find from the parking lot to the architectural open spaces; the shared assumptions about why you have come and what you expect to find; the common practices of entering, finding your bearings, and feeling welcomed. As at shopping malls, many of us are shaped by repeated visits to churches, as a place for meeting friends, seeking fellowship (or entertainment), and searching for meaning and identity.

Smith calls these repeated activities, “the sort of practices that form us, that form our core or ultimate identities,” and that make us the kind of people we are and what we love. He goes on:

Our identity is shaped by what we ultimately love or what we love as ultimate – what, at the end of the day, gives us a sense of meaning, purpose, understanding, to our being-in-the-world. What we desire or love ultimately is a vision of what we hope for, what we think the good life looks like. This vision of the good life shapes all kinds of actions and decisions and habits we undertake, often without thinking about it.¹

¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*

In this sense, our repeated activities of going to church, or visiting the mall, should reveal something about what we most deeply love and desire. Everyone loves something (or some things) and that love is formed by our habits and environments. Those who visit the mall are bombarded with messages – outward and subliminal – about what to purchase or acquire in order to live a good life of beauty and contentment. So, what about the church? What are we taught to love, and what are the practices that help give us purpose and meaning?

The world teaches us – as Jesus alludes to in today’s gospel passage – that we should love our neighbors but hate our enemies. The Bible never actually says this, but we certainly can point to places – like in today’s responsive Psalm reading – where people plead to God to bring victory over, or even harm upon, their enemies, those who threaten or hurt or oppress them.

Given the way that people in this world sometimes treat each other – and especially when there is a power imbalance – a desire for vengeance can seem reasonable. Far too many women and children have been victims of assault in this world by people they should have been able to trust, or by soldiers that were brainwashed into cruelty. Far too many Black people, gay people, and gender non-conforming people have been attacked and even killed just for being who they are. These people did not seek out conflict, but people made themselves enemies to them by their cruel and violent actions.²

In such situations, the principle of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” seems like justice. The punishment, we think, should fit the crime. Jesus, however, tells his followers not to resist one who is doing evil, but to turn the other cheek. When we are wronged, he says, it would be better to suffer more wrong than to retaliate unjustly.

Jesus’ message may not appeal much to those in power, especially those with the ability to act without fear of retaliation. But Jesus’ audience would have consisted mainly of peasants living at the subsistence level. They would have known well the heavy taxation of Rome and experienced the evils of political oppression. Yet, Jesus does not rally them to overthrow the government; for God’s kingdom is bigger than Roman rule and God’s power is greater than Roman oppression. Yes, God’s justice

² Siri Strommen, *A Curriculum of Love*

will ultimately prevail; Jesus will, indeed, prove his kingship in this Gospel, but with a crown of thorns and on a Roman cross.³

Still, these would-be kingdom bearers that Jesus addresses here are not called to suffer passively; but, instead, to do the seemingly unthinkable. They are called to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them so that they may be “children of your Father who is in heaven.” This is a God who allows the sun to shine on the evil and the good, and rain to fall on the just and the unjust. God – the creator of all, with the power over life and death – provides life-sustaining conditions even for those who are opposed to God’s goodness. Anyone can love the lovely; Jesus demands, in addition, that we love even those who appear incapable of showing love in return.

The heart of the Law, as Jesus interprets it, rests in loving your enemies and praying even for those who persecute you. This is no easy task; it is not something any of us who have known or suffered from enemies wants to pursue. The reason that one ought to do it is that God is like this, and we are God’s children. God does not hate the enemy; instead, the good gifts of life – the sun and rain – are lavished on everyone.

This command to love our enemies should not be understood abstractly. For Jesus and his followers, it referred particularly to these occupying Roman forces, and thus to national enemies as well as to competing religious groups and personal enemies. So for us, today, it would mean all those on the other side of the political spectrum, the people who speak or act with ignorance or malice, and those with beliefs or practices we may not like nor understand.

And so, because we live amid so much divisiveness and animosity, we find ourselves judging each other mercilessly, wishing harm for harm; but God sees the world differently. Yes, consequences are necessary in response to the damage that is caused, but ultimately, it is transformation and repentance that is needed for the cycle of hurt on our planet to stop. The only remedy to the existence of enemies is healing.

Thus, loving our enemies is wishing for their healing; for their release from whatever suffering has them trapped. The only way to truly “get rid” of our enemies is to transform them into peaceful children of God. While penal consequences for their actions might be justified and necessary, healing is the only outcome that will

³ Carla Works from *WorkingPreacher.com*

ultimately bring peace. That is why we are called to pray for our enemies and persecutors. We pray for peace to come into their hearts, because if they are at peace, they will no longer be a threat to anyone. We love our enemies by wishing for them to be healed, whole, and at peace; and for what they love to be transformed from cruelty and bias to equity and compassion; to be fully converted into God's mercy and love.

Only in Matthew's account are such actions classified as what it means to be "perfect." This is the type of spiritual maturity – a radical orientation of the heart – that Jesus ultimately desires from his followers. While, as our Affirmation of Faith from Romans 12 will say, it may have the effect of heaping burning coals on their heads, the final goal is not to inflict pain but, instead, encourage peace.

Perfection, here, does not mean making an A+ on every test; perfection is wholeness, holiness, being consumed by love. To be perfect is to respond to other people – even enemies, even persecutors – with the kind of passion and desire for the good that seeks to mirror the ways that God responds to the world.⁴

Contrary to the Greek abstract ideal of perfection, of remaining untarnished by concrete involvement in the material world, for Matthew's Jesus, it is precisely amid all the relativities and ambiguities of our concrete actions in this world – which is God's creation, despite its state of brokenness – that the follower of Jesus is called to be perfect. To be perfect is to serve God wholeheartedly, to be single-minded in devotion, not to be drawn in different directions like those mall storefronts do. It is to know that we could only hope to love our enemies – those who have already done and, we fear, would seek to do us harm – because we are what we love; that our repeated practices and habits match what we desire most: to love God.

Let us pray: *Loving God, we pray you will bring love and peace to all souls, that we may all be free and happy. May all our enemies be transformed through your grace. Amen.*

⁴ Thomas Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion Series