

“Facing our Enemies”  
Matthew 5:38-48  
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Cottage Grove United Church of Christ  
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His name was Josh, and we were enemies. We simply did *not* get along. We were both working as chaplains at at Seton Medical Center in Daly City, California, and I’m not even quite sure what it was that we disagreed on. Basically, we disagreed on *everything*. We *tried* to settle our differences. We used numerous conflict resolution techniques to work through our problems. We tried resolving our issues with the support of our fellow chaplains. *None* of it worked. He didn’t like me and I didn’t like him, and that was that.

Then we went on Christmas break. We were both gone for about a week, and when we came back to the hospital our relationship was suddenly different. We got along! We liked each other! It was so strange. No one could figure out what had changed. We hadn’t found a new conflict resolution technique -- every one we had tried had failed. We hadn’t really made a conscious decision to put our differences aside. For some reason we just suddenly got along. We worked well together for the next few months, until Josh left the hospital, and I continued to exchange Christmas cards with him and his wife for a number of years afterward.

I can only believe that it had to have been the grace of God that allowed us to enjoy one another’s company after being enemies for so long. Nothing else had worked, so what else could it be? God must have somehow worked within both of us to help us love the enemy we found in one another.

I am glad that Josh and I miraculously resolved our differences, but in our Gospel reading for this morning Jesus teaches us to love our enemies *consciously*. In other words, it’s not good enough to just wait around for the grace of God to help us get along better. We have to work at it.

Loving one’s enemies is counterintuitive. Jesus himself admits this when he says “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Our enemies are just that: *enemies*. Whether they are a colleague with whom we do not get along, an ex-spouse, a childhood classmate, or an entire nation with whom we are at

war, the *last* thing we usually want to do is love our enemies. Even if we *do* want to get along better -- Josh and I really did try -- it is very difficult to lovingly embrace an enemy with whom you simply do not get along.

Yet, this is exactly what Jesus is telling us to do, in no uncertain terms. He does not mean that we should merely shake hands, say we like each other, and move on. This is not love. This is not even usually *like*. Instead, Jesus is calling us to all-out love the people with whom we have the most difficulty.

Jesus isn't the only one with the idea either. In our reading from Leviticus, the Lord tells Moses that "You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself." In other words, if you're upset with someone, tell them. The Lord goes on to tell Moses that we should not hold grudges against one another. It's not good enough to kiss and make up, while secretly stewing over the supposedly past conflict. *We have to let it go.*

Now, loving our enemies does not mean that we must stay in abusive relationships. When Jesus says that we should "turn the other cheek," he is not saying that we should allow people to abuse us -- although this scripture has been used to argue just that in the past and is probably still used by some abusers to keep victims in their place.

Jesus is not even saying that we must stay in other relationships that are not working. There can come a time when a relationship reaches its end. But regardless of whether the relationship continues or ends, we must work to resolve our differences to the best of our ability -- and beyond: Jesus says we must be perfect like God in our love for one another. We cannot let hatred fester within us, because it will poison our very being and poison our enemies too. We must lay down our arms and be at peace with one another.

I am glad that Josh and I were able to do this. He turned into a good colleague and friend, and we supported one another through some difficult moments. While I believe it was the grace of God that ultimately mended our rift, I think the conflict resolution techniques we tried must have eventually worked too. We might not have felt like anything was working when we were at war with one another, but perhaps, subconsciously, the things we tried were drawing us closer together.

If you are in conflict with someone, do all that you can to mend the conflict. This begins with honest communication and ends with truly loving those people you called enemies. Whether you need to mend a relationship with a romantic partner, a colleague, a family member, or whether you need to begin to love an entire *people* with whom you feel at

war, get started. Jesus taught this lesson more than two thousand years ago, and we have a lot of catching up to do.

*Now let us pray.*