

## An Open Letter to God about Loving our Enemies

### *Matthew 5: 38-48*

*“You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemies’ but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”*

In lieu of a sermon this week, I found myself bumping up against the reality that I am not very good at loving my enemies as Jesus commands. I struggled to come to terms with what Jesus meant when he said not to resist an evildoer. So I decided to write God an open letter and to struggle with this passage before you all. I pray you find something true of your own struggle with Jesus’s words...

---

Dear God,

I know you have been busy lately with this being an election year and all. But I just had to tell you: that while I would love to pretend that I can preach on the text where you tell us to love our enemies, I cannot do so in good conscience. You see, this passage is too often used to justify the tolerance of cruelty in the name of holy pacifism.

In case you didn’t already know—which I imagine you do since you are God—this text has been used to tell Black people to keep loving racists who openly practice hate toward them; and women to keep turning the other cheek in abusive situations. This text was used after the incident in Charlottesville, when Heather Heyer was killed because of a white supremacist who rammed his car into a group of counter-protesters. At a memorial service held for her, I heard white ministers tell the grieving church your words about loving our enemies, as if loving white supremacists would magically change their violent racist ideologies.

If I told the good people in the room to love their enemies, and “not to resist an evildoer” like you do, it might sound like I would be telling them to tolerate injustices in your name; and hasn’t the church done enough of that? I mean, slavery existed for 250 years because we tolerated it. Genocide was performed against Native American tribes because the church tolerated it. Segregation was normalized because the church tolerated it. Today oil companies dig pipelines through sacred grounds, and children sit in detention centers separated from their parents, and our world is warming at exponential rates because we have tolerated it.

No offense, God, but the command to love enemies and not resist evildoers sounds a bit naïve. The other day I was driving down the road when I saw a bumper sticker with the word “L-O-V-E” on it. I thought how nice, until I got closer and realized the letters were made up of an assortment of AR-15s, oozies, and handguns. It made me sick to my stomach because even love becomes weaponized. I mean, we live in a county where people became hostile when talking

about becoming a sanctuary place for immigrants but have recently voted to become a sanctuary place for the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment. And we are to simply love them without resistance? I'm sorry, God, but I cannot preach this, as if everyone has a moral compass that could be appealed to. You of all people should know this!

Frankly, it is easier to love the people who are forgotten, or to love our neighbors who look different than us, but to love our enemies? God, most of us have tried to do our part to reach out to those who disagree with us. We have listened to what others have had to say about why they believe and think the way they do. It simply boils down to irreconcilable differences. For example, at a conference where a group of conservative political thinkers gathered, the keynote speaker stood before the conservative crowd and said, "You've heard a lot today that you've agreed with...You've also heard a lot about the other side and how [liberals] are wrong. But I want you to remember something: Political liberals are not stupid and they are not evil. They simply disagree with you about public policy. And if you want to persuade them...remember that no one has been insulted into agreement. You can only persuade with love." Apparently, it didn't preach to them either, because after the speech a woman ran up to him and said, "You're wrong! Liberals *are* stupid and evil!" It's what some conservatives believe about liberals, and I have heard these same contemptuous words being said about conservative people as well. And while persuading those with love sounds really holy and nice, nobody seems convinced it actually works. Simply put, it just doesn't preach.

But then I begin to think about what might happen if we stopped choosing love, and how love isn't a feeling as much as it is a choice. I think of Dr. King and others who kept marching in the face of hatred, trying to muster up as much gospel power as they could because, "Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." And then there was the Vietnamese minister I once met who was thrown into a Vietnamese prison for speaking out in Vietnam against the Vietnam war. Everyday, he would tell the officers who abused him in the drafty prison that he was praying for them and their families. He would tell them that he forgave them because he knew they were just doing their jobs to support their own families and if the situation had been reversed he would probably have done the same. It made me wonder if you meant that while loving our enemies is costly, it also comes with a great reward. Because while it might not change other's behaviors, it gives us the power to reframe the situation, to let go of our contempt, to not lose sight of our interconnected humanity, and in the process of doing so, to become truly free.

I heard a story on NPR about a couple of children who lost their mother due to a terrorist bombing in the Middle East. The men responsible were caught and put in prison. But one of the girls kept being haunted by the question, "Why did they do this?" So when the opportunity came for them to meet the men responsible for their mother's death the girls took it. Out came a man in shackles and a jumpsuit. He sat down and one of the girls asked him, "Why?" Then through her tears, she went on to tell the man a story about how she kept asking her father, "Where is my mother?" And how her father would try to explain by responding, "She is at Allah's house." So, not knowing any better, the girl would run as fast as she could to the Mosque and would wait for hours searching every woman who came or left just trying to see

her mother again. "She never came," she told the man. After hearing the story, the man grabbed the girl's hand, and pleaded, "Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me? Please, pray for me." The amazing thing was: after the encounter, you could hear the girl smiling and saying that a great burden had been lifted from her; and when asked if she would be praying for him, she said "yes."

God, it doesn't always make sense, but I guess you are trying to teach us that love is a choice; and that those who are committed to following your way choose love, even when it seems impossible to do so, for the sake of everyone's freedom.

Why? Because choosing love is who *you* are. You forgive us time and time again, even after we repeat our damaging histories and it seems clear we will never learn. You continue to inspire us to keep seeking peace and justice even though the work is exhausting and endless. And you show us what loving our enemies looks like on the cross; because you are a God who would rather die than hold a grudge. You would rather die than see any of your children as an enemy.

Okay, I get it...sort of. So maybe I'll start by thinking of someone who has disagreed with me, or hurt me, or someone who represents everything that I believe to be wrong with the world and then, I'll pray for them. I still don't think I can preach a sermon about it, but perhaps I can start there. Perhaps the congregation can join me in doing the same.

Thanks for hearing me, God.... For allowing us to come as we are and allowing us to be where we are. And for encouraging us to love as radically as you do for the sake of peace and justice, and everyone's freedom. After all, love isn't a feeling; love is a choice. And where would the world be without people who choose it?

Yours truly,  
Jon

P.S. Now is the time where we will all take a minute to pray for someone we disagree with, or someone who we might consider an enemy be it politically or religiously or whatever. And if we cannot do that, then let's simply pray for God to meet us where we are.