

Love Your Enemies

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Love your enemies? Pray for those who persecute you? My dear persecuted Kurds in Iraq, shower your love on Saddam Hussein? Armenians once again threatened with genocide, think kindly of the Azerbaijani blockading you? Refugees watering the ways of Bosnia, say "Bless you" to the raping Serbs? Children of Somalia, think lovingly of the warlords wasting you? Survivors of Auschwitz, love the Nazis who exterminated six million of your fellow Jews? Survivors of Hiroshima, love the Enola Gay bombardier who irradiated uncounted thousands of you? General Noriega, cast your eye lovingly on the George Bush who whisked you from your Panama empire to an American jail? Mother and father, love the beast who ravished your child?

Good friends, the breath-taking command of Jesus raises not only a challenge but a problem. A crucial problem, for it focuses on the core of the Christian reality. It highlights a critical four-letter word: love. So, let's muse on three trouble areas: (1) the word "love," (2) the love Jesus preached, and (3) our own love of the enemy—the enemy that is "not us."

II

First, the word "love." If words could sue for verbal abuse, "love" would fill our courts with their anguish. For love is the golden jubilee of a wedding, and love is a one-night stand shaped of chemistry and alcohol. Love is a child born of total self-giving, and love is good safe sex. Love is erotic joy between equal partners, and love is pornographic power and possession. Love is God giving a Son to a cross for us, and love is what Bostonians feel for the Celtics. Love is a tough self-sacrifice, and love is a sexy TV pitch for diamonds, toothpaste, mouthwash. We love Siamese cats and Subaru cars; we love pepperoni pizza and a souped-up Harley; we love the sun on our skin and the chill of a strawberry daiquiri. Another way of saying "good-bye"? "Love ya."

I am not trying to lock love into a straitjacket, a single meaning. One beauty of English is the shapes a word can take, its nuances, shades of meaning: Just think of cross, of faith, of resurrection. But love is in peril of losing its legitimate meanings when it comes to mean anything at all...or nothing.

And still it's true: Love is difficult to define. A pulpit is not the place for a history, for a disquisition on Plato's love-as-longing or Aristotle's love-as-friendship. But it does demand that we focus on what Christianity has contributed to the concept. If I want to grasp the inner essence of love, I would do well to look first to God: who God is and what God has done. Who is God? Here the basic newness was pithily expressed in the First Letter of John: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). God's secret life reveals a loving community of divine Persons, wherein there is indeed I-and-thou but never mine-and-thine. What has God done? God's outreach reveals a powerful God who shaped a universe to mirror divine love, an imaginative God who fashioned male and female to image God's love, a

compassionate God who gave an only Son to a torturous cross not from necessity but from an excess of love, not for a limited elite but for every man and woman from Adam to Antichrist.

A Roman Catholic tradition, from Dionysius the Ps.-Areopagite through Thomas Aquinas to John Courtney Murray, sees a twin force in love, whether human love or divine. On the one hand (to borrow Murray's rhetoric), love is a centripetal force: Love makes for oneness; the lover produces another self. On the other hand, love is a centrifugal force: Love makes for ec-stasy; love carries the lover outside himself, outside herself; the lover becomes self-less.¹ Such is love divine; such should be love that is genuinely human.

II

Let's move to Jesus, to the love Jesus preached. You know, Jesus loved the law of Moses. Some Christians tend to speak disparagingly of Jewish law, the Torah, the Five Books of Moses; so many of us identify the Prior Testament with a divine despot, strict justice overpowering mercy, an erroneous understanding of "an eye for an eye." But in the Jewish tradition the great guiding principle of Jewish law is love. Not love in high abstraction; rather, a love that reaches up to a living God and out to bone-and-blood brothers and sisters.

Back in the early days of our Jewish-Christian era, Rabbi Akiba, a remarkable scholar and saint, claimed that the whole of Jewish law was summed up in a single verse from Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). For him, the purpose of law was to teach love of neighbor—a love that had to be taught, had to be commanded, because no blood tie links us to the man and woman next door. More than that, Rabbi Akiba was martyred by the Romans because he refused to cease teaching the Torah. As he was being executed, he said he now knew the meaning of the verse "You shall love the Lord— your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:5). It means, you are to love God even if God takes your life.²

It is this kind of love that Jesus preached—preached it from his Jewish background and from his unique intimacy with his Father. When a Pharisee asked him, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" he responded, "Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind." Then he added a second commandment, "Love your neighbor [at least as much] as you love yourself." This commandment he commended with a phrase that should adorn every refrigerator door: This commandment "is like" the first (Mt 22:34—39). Loving your neighbor is like loving God. Not to love the human images of God is not to love God.

More than that, Jesus made quite clear what he meant by "neighbor." It was not only the family next door in Nazareth, but the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem. Not only fellow Jews in the fold, but the despised Samaritans. Not only the common folk who "spoke well of him" and resonated to "the gracious words that came from his mouth" (Lk 4:22), but his relatives who thought he was off his rocker. Not only Lazarus and his sisters who could serve up a gourmet meal, but the sinful woman who bathed his feet with her tears and the paralytic imprisoned on his cot, the despised toll collector and the leper ostracized from society. Not only the John who rested his head on Jesus at the supper, but the Peter who denied him and the Thomas who doubted him and the Judas who sold him for silver.

And then that sentence which must have perplexed his hearers: "Love your enemies, pray

for your persecutors" (Mt 5:44). Not only the exhortation in Proverbs, "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall" (Prv 24:17). Not only Elisha telling the king of Israel, "You shall not slay [the defeated Syrians]...Set bread and water before them...and let them go to their master" (2 Kgs 6:22).³ From Jesus, a clear command to love. Love the Pompey who captured Jerusalem? Love your Roman masters, the soldiers that hold you and your land in bondage?⁴ Love Pilate? Love Herod? Did Jesus actually love the Herods who sought his infant life and beheaded his kinsman the Baptist? The answer is...yes indeed! But to grasp its inner meaning, we must move to ourselves—to ourselves and the enemy that is "not us."

III

Last week's issue of *Time* magazine featured two articles on love and its chemistry.⁵ Granted their limited scope—romantic love and the recent interest of biologists and anthropologists—it still is a discouraging commentary on our cultural priorities when the story of love is restricted to evolutionary roots, brain imprints, and biological secretions, when only the penultimate sentence suggests that love is "a commingling of body and soul, reality and imagination, poetry and phenylethylamine."⁶ Not a word about a kind of love that centuries ago Rabbi Akiba realized has to be taught, has to be learned, because in those instances no blood ties, no chemistry, link us to the other; because the only ties are our common humanity, the redemption of all of us by a God-man on a bloody cross, and the fact that, despite sin, God's image can never be totally obliterated in any human by the mark of Cain.

Of such realities is fashioned a Christian love of enemies. Not an easy love. A first difficulty: What does such love mean? Not what love of friendship means: We are attracted to each other, we feel affection for each other, we are fused in soul—what Augustine of Hippo called "one soul in two bodies."⁷ It is not identical with forgiveness: I must somehow love terrorists who have bombed a bus filled with children, even if it makes no sense to forgive them while they still rejoice in their carnage. What, then, am I like when I love those who hate me?

Soon after the war in the Persian Gulf, I gave a baccalaureate homily at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. I insisted that only one thing could justify their uniform: that they are peacemakers. What basic quality underlies a peacemaker? A profound respect for life. So deep a respect that no man's death, no woman's death, is an unqualified blessing, a good thing in every way. It goes back to God's own declaration in the book of Ezekiel: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek 33:11). It is a respect for life that molds every Christian into a man or woman of compassion. Com-passion: I "suffer with" those who hate me, who seek my life. And I pray for them. Pray that they may turn from their ways and live. I hate what they do; I do not hate those who do it—Stalin, Saddam Hussein, the serial rapist.⁸

I said above that this is something I must be taught, must learn; it is not inherited, not a function of my genes. But the learning process is at once sticky and startling. When the chips are down, when reason fails to sway me, when I see no trace whatsoever of the image of Christ in the other, then I love those who hate me, who destroy my dear ones, who starve the world's children, simply because Jesus tells me to.

But learning from Jesus is not sheer obedience to a command. In Jesus I see with my own

eyes, hear with my own ears, love of enemies in action—the "love of another kind" that Amy Grant sings. I stand beneath a cross and hear a God-man murmur through bloodstained lips, "Father, forgive them" (Lk 23:34). Forgive whom? Not only the Herod who treated him with contempt and the Pilate who handed him over to crucifixion; not only the leaders who scoffed at him and the soldiers who mocked him and the criminal who derided him. Listen to Paul: "...while we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of God's Son" (Rom 5:10). A sobering thought: The enemy is not totally "out there." *We*—all men and women from Eden on—we are the enemy transformed by Christ's love. With that in mind, dare we still divide the world between "us" and "them"? Can we possibly play Christ to our little world if we do not struggle to imitate the Christ of Calvary?

Here we find "good news" indeed. You see, what makes love of enemy possible in my life as well as in Christ's is not my high I.Q.; it is the God of compassion active within me, the God who is Compassion, the God who, says the Psalmist, "does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities" (Ps 103:10). The grace to love our enemies is there for us—even the grace to grasp the grace. Once again, very simply, "for God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26).

A perceptive author has recently written:

...what [Jesus] taught about loving enemies is fundamental, not peripheral, to the church and its understanding of its own existence. Indeed it is fundamental to the survival of the human race. Unless humans learn to live with their enemies, indeed, unless we learn to love our enemies, our days on this earth are numbered.⁹

It is not only our ravaged earth that threatens our existence; so too does our failure to love, our innate or our learned habit of loving only those who love us. It threatens not only our physical existence but our life in Christ, Christ living in us, our ability to cry with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). And remember, only love can destroy hate. I am reminded of Augustine's insight: "There is nothing that invites love more than to be beforehand in loving; and that heart is overhard which, even though it were unwilling to bestow love, would be unwilling to return it."¹⁰

Dear Lord: Impregnate us with the grace to act as your children should, to love our enemies as you love them—you who make your "sun rise on the evil and on the good," you who send "rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45). Grace us to experience what you command: to imitate your holiness, to be holy somewhat as you are holy. Grace me to start not overseas with an autocrat in Iraq, but in my own back yard, in my office, in my classroom, in my parish. Wherever I live and move and breathe, grace me to love as your Son loved, the Jesus who lived for sinners and died even for those who crucified him, who lives and rules with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

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