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Leviticus 19: 1 – 2, 9 – 18  
 1 Corinthians 3: 10 – 11, 16 – 23

Psalms 119: 33 – 40  
 Matthew 5: 38 – 48

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**“You’ve 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...”**

Okay, Jesus. This is hyperbole, right? You can’t seriously mean that I’m supposed to love those who walk all over me, oppress me, say ugly things about me, set me up, beat me up, who are for everything that I’m opposed to, and generally make life hell for me, can you? Really?? Love them?? Pray for them?? Define ‘love.’

Oh. Wait a minute, Jesus. What if you’re saying this to others in regards to me?

In this day and time, when we are so divided as a country – not to mention the broken relationships in our personal lives – these words of Jesus sound like so much hooey, so much of an impossibility. Why on earth – quite literally – would we want to love our enemies? And how do we choose to define ‘enemy?’

- Someone who used to be a friend but betrayed us?
- Someone who wants to thwart or undermine everything we do at work or at school?
- Someone who is actively plotting to harm us?
- Estranged ex’s or family members?
- People who are just irritating in every way imaginable?
- People who are completely wrong-headed politically?
- People who like to throw a stick of dynamite into the room just to watch what happens, and then stand by and laugh?

Why in the world would we want to love someone (or some people) like THAT?? Because God does. It’s as simple as that.

God makes the sun to rise over the evil and the good, Jesus says. God sends rain on the righteous as well as on the unrighteous. God’s grace and mercy and love show absolutely no partiality. And so, because we are holy (meaning set aside for a special purpose, for God’s purposes), we are to be like God. It may be simple, but man, that is SO hard!

And it is just as hard for Jesus’ immediate audience. After all, Israel is God’s chosen people. How can God have chosen a people, and yet not play favorites? Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount (of which today’s passage is a part), Jesus has already answered that. Israel has been chosen to be a light to the world, a beacon to guide others in from the darkness. Israel has been chosen so that God can work through them to bless all the peoples of the earth. That light hasn’t always shined very brightly, but now, Jesus says, now is the time to put it on a lampstand.

Israel has always had a lot of enemies and has been oppressed, off and on, ever since their time in Egypt. And time and again, the Israelites have rushed headlong into the darkness all by

themselves through their unfaithfulness to God. Sometimes their enemies have been external, and sometimes, to borrow from Pogo, Israel has met the enemy in themselves. The people listening to Jesus preach are completely dominated by their Roman oppressors and are subjected to harsh rules and taxes. To top that off, the social inequities within the Jewish people themselves are being exacerbated, with a few getting richer (mostly those who corroborate with the Romans) and with many getting poorer and poorer. (Sound familiar?) So even within Judaism there are divisions and hostilities.

Now along comes Jesus, proclaiming a new order – an order of justice and righteousness where no one has too much and all have enough. An order of healing and reconciliation, where love always trumps evil. But a world that just doesn't seem very fair, if it means having to love the ones who wish to do you harm, and to turn the other cheek even if that might invite more trouble. "Because your Father in heaven is perfect, you should be, too," Jesus tells his listeners. To hate one's enemies is human; to forgive, and therefore to love, is divine. Author John Yieh notes that only when believers can develop the character of divine virtue can they garner the necessary spiritual strength to love the unlovable and pray for their oppressors. That unusual (by the world's standards) kind of love is what will set Jesus' followers apart.

"Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect?" But Jesus, I can't be perfect, you and I are probably both thinking. That's an impossible standard to meet. You know what it's like to be human, Jesus, why are you even asking for moral perfection from us?? It helps to understand what is meant here by the word 'perfect.' And it's worth noting that people in Scripture who were considered righteous or 'perfect,' such as Abraham and Noah, were far from examples of moral perfection. The word which is translated as 'perfect' is the Greek word *τελειος*. Which really means 'end purpose,' or ultimate and final purpose. [continuous present tense – keep on (verb)] Therefore, being 'perfect' is about moving towards the purpose for which God has created you or me. To be perfect, as the Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton notes, is to be completely focused on our roles in God's Kingdom.

The other night on PBS, there was a special biography program on Congressman John Lewis. If ever there has been a person who has lived into Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek, it is Representative Lewis. Despite all the beatings, imprisonments and mistreatment he has endured working for Civil Rights (what he has referred to as the good and necessary trouble that he has gotten into), he has never once advocated violence towards those who have hurt him or tried to humiliate him. Even when others in the movement felt that it was the only way. Nothing, he says, makes him question the way of Jesus, the way of non-violence.

Congressman Lewis told the story again of how, in 1965, as he and the other marchers came across the crest of the bridge in Selma, they saw the line of white law enforcement officers and others in an angry mob, armed with sticks and dogs and other weapons. They all knew that they were in for a lot more than simply being slapped on the cheek. The man walking next to Lewis suddenly dropped down on his knees and began praying for the welfare of the marchers, as well as for all of the people who were facing them and blocking their way. Lewis and the rest of the marchers also knelt down and prayed, before rising to link arms and continue down to what awaited them. Talk about loving your enemy and praying for those who persecute you! It didn't stop any of the violence against them any more than Jesus' prayer on the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" stops the crucifixion. Lewis nearly died and many were badly injured. But, like the cross, it showed that violence can never defeat love. And praying for our oppressors doesn't necessarily change them; it changes us.

Love your enemies and pray for your oppressors. In his book, "Whistling in the Dark," Frederick Buechner writes "Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them, meaning love not in an emotional sense but in the sense of willing their good, which is the sense in which we love ourselves. You see where they're vulnerable. You see where they're scared. And in seeing what is hateful about them, you just might catch a glimpse also of where the hatefulness comes from. Seeing the hurt they cause you, you may see also the hurt they cause themselves. "You're still light-years away from loving them, to be sure," Buechner notes, "but at least you see how they are human even as you are human, and that is at least a step in the right direction."

So perhaps that is our ultimate challenge in this time of division and isolation. How do we learn to actually stop and look at the people we consider our enemies and see them as fellow human beings, as husbands and wives, sons and daughters, spouses and friends, but most especially as children of God, just like you and me? If we could see them through the eyes of God – the same eyes which look so lovingly upon us – what would we see?

Love your enemies and pray for your oppressors, Jesus says. Love your neighbors, says the prophet, Isaiah. G. K. Chesterton, writer and good friend of both C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, famously wrote that we are "asked to love both our enemies and our neighbors because, generally speaking, they are the same people." Perhaps often, they are. But God calls us to love them, and in so doing, we love God. And ourselves.

So what are the implications for us as we consider those things which divide us: 1) war, terrorism and oppression, especially as it applies to "sojourners in a foreign land" – refugees and migrants; 2) our economic divisions, which affect healthcare and education; and 3) something so basic as how we view anyone who is in any way different from us? God's grace and mercy and love show no impartiality; they know no boundaries. Our end purpose, our telos, as creatures created in the image of this loving God is to go and do likewise.

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