

Sermon Text for May 1, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 32:16-18, Matthew 5:43-48

“Love your enemies”

I met with one of the pastors of Bethany Slavic Church, Konstantin Resnik along with Tim Ott and Peter Witmer. Did you know that there is a community of Russian believers in Ephrata that is not insignificant. He said there are about 10 Russian speaking churches in the area and they alone get about 400 people in church on Sundays. That's impressive. So I asked him how do they deal with the war in Ukraine since their church is composed primarily of Russian and Ukrainian and Belarussian believers, is it divisive. He said, no, we don't get into the politics, we just recognize that there is a serious humanitarian crisis and we have work to do to meet the immediate needs that are present in that crisis.

If ever there were a clear possibility to identify friends and foes, allies and enemies, it would be in that situation. Without a doubt, he said, we hold our opinions and we understand what we believe about the situation, Russia has invaded Ukraine and should leave, but we do not view it from the perspective of enemies. Jesus clearly commands us to love our enemies. There is no wiggle room in his commandment that we are going to read today. This seeming impossibility becomes possible when we look at it through the lens of history and through the lens of the love that God has for us, for us sinners, for us who consider ourselves enemies of God every time that we turn our back on him.

So who has taught us over history how to love our enemies? The obvious answer is Jesus who had very real enemies in the Romans who crucified him and the religious leaders who shunned him. Father forgive them for they do not know what they do. Remember Ghandhi? He had some real enemies. Who were Ghandhi's enemies? The British, right, and their colonial rule that he was able to bring to its knees with non-violence and active resistance. Closer to our lifetime we have the example of MLK who had very clear enemies, the KKK, the normal every day person.

It is still hard for me to believe that in our lifetime the enemies of MLK refused to allow brothers and sisters in Christ, our neighbors, our friends were not allowed to be in certain places because of their race. It was very clear who was an enemy to the person of color during those days. Each person had very clear enemies, Jesus, Ghandhi, MLK who were trying to keep them down and keep them from pursuing righteousness.

If I were to ask you today, who is your enemy who would you answer? Who is your enemy? Now, those people I just mentioned would not have had to hesitate, there were clearly people out to get them and eventually those people did get them, but not before they were able to change the society around them, for Jesus' sake the world around him. Without a clear view today, how do we interpret love your enemies today in this day and age?

Today I'm thinking that people who at times pretend to be followers of Jesus Christ might have made up their minds who is for them and who is against them. For the first time that I can think of the most important defining attribute of a person for many is political belief. It used to be that if you were family or if you are my church brother or sister then that takes precedence over everything else. If you think differently from me then that's okay, we are still family, you're not my enemy, we are family. You're not one of them, you're one of us, family.

But now, for some, politics has become the building block upon which to separate and divide people. You are my family, my friends if you think politically the way that I do, that takes precedence now for some people. So if my blood family or my church family thinks differently than I do politically, that has become the most important and they are now my enemy even if we are family by blood or by the church.

They may not use the term enemy, but they will separate themselves from you and every conversation with you will address the differences. There has been a clear shifting of loyalty for some people, and that shift has made people the enemy, where in the past the enemy would never have been your blood or church family. We now show partiality to those who think like we do. That should not be, that is not the way of God. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's read.

READ

Let's go back to our Isaiah Scripture where we find depicted a world of peace as a result of righteousness. Shalom, peace, is that after which we all strive. There are some sitting here who would do anything for a settled heart and a single day without anxiety and stress. Peace is what many of us are searching for and Isaiah states that peace can only come about if we were to pursue righteousness.

I have gotten to know Pastor Jose Jimenez a pastor in Lancaster city. Jose is different. He has brought about in the 6th ward a place of peace and a place where Jesus is obvious king. People will come over to his house and play board games, seek out counseling, it has become more of a community center than a single dwelling. Not everyone appreciates that because that neighborhood used to be run by something other than the kingdom of God. One day Jose was in

his house playing boardgames with his family when he heard a pop, and then another and then another and I believe someone shot at his house more than 2 dozen times. Miraculously, no one was hurt. It was meant to intimidate and drive him out and create a dwelling that was without peace.

You know what Jose did? He began ordering door dash for the home where they suspect the shots came from and paying for it every single day. The first time the person said we didn't order door dash, and the person said, I know, but Pastor Jose wants you to have it and it is paid in full. His response in the face of those who would consider him an enemy, was one of clear love. You see, abiding in peace is another offshoot of the ability to love our enemies and who wouldn't want that? You see, to love one's enemies is, then, to treat them as God treats those who have rebelled against him. With grace and compassion. We can choose how to respond, Jesus commands us exactly how to do it in Matthew.

Jesus' command in Matthew is one that strikes a chord for all of us. Read it again and just try to imagine what that means: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Let's be clear on what it means when we are persecuted for our faith. It means that you have people shooting at you through your windows in your house. It doesn't mean that a school doesn't allow you to pray on the 50 yard line, that isn't persecution, that is privilege. Persecution is when you are being shelled as you make your way to Orthodox Easter at midnight. Let's be clear what we are talking about here.

Our choice when we are facing enemies can be threefold: History unfortunately leaves some people oppressed and some people oppressors. And there are three ways that individuals who are oppressed can deal with their oppression. One of them is to rise up against their oppressors with physical violence and corroding hatred. But this isn't the way. For the danger and the weakness of this method is its futility. Violence creates many more social problems than it solves. If people succumb to the temptation of using violence in their struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and their chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. Violence isn't the way.

Another way is to acquiesce and to give in, to resign yourself to the oppression. Some people do that. They discover the difficulties of the wilderness moving into the promised land, and they would rather go back to the despots of Egypt because it's difficult to get in the promised land. And so they resign themselves to the fate of oppression; they somehow acquiesce to this

thing. But that too isn't the way because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

But there is another way. And that is to organize mass non-violent resistance based on the principle of love. It seems to me that this is the only way as our eyes look to the future. We must discover the power of love, the power, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that we will be able to make of this old world a new world. We will be able to make men better. Love is the only way. Jesus discovered that.

He told those who would listen to him on that hill far away that you have heard it said hate your enemies. Who is going around today telling people to hate their enemies? Nowhere in the Bible does it say: hate your enemies. No one who is a child of God would ever tell another person to hate their enemies. Instead Jesus said, but I say to you. That's something new, that's something different. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Jesus seems to change the norm for both faith and practice.

And when we encounter Jesus, when we say that we love Jesus and we are his followers, and I'm guessing everyone here would say that, then we are also called to be different. We are called to be Romans 12 Christians in light of this Matthew verse. What is a Romans 12 Christian you ask? Well, let me tell you: 12:14, 12:17-21.

Jesus wasn't playing when he told the people to love their enemies, he knew it was a very serious commandment for them, as it is for us. We are called to recognize that God doesn't play favorites. God loves us and God loves our enemies. God loves republicans and God loves democrats. God loves those kissed by the sun and those who are a bit pasty. God loves male and God loves female. God loves those who are straight and God loves those who are gay. Why would you say that one Bob, come on, can't you skip that one. No, because I have heard some say from pulpits that God only loves based upon certain conditions and I'm telling you here today that is a lie. And if God is able to love in that way then surely we are called to love in the same way.

Whoever you may consider your enemy, remember, they are God's children, his beloved, his creation just as much as we are. Love isn't something that you feel, but rather something that you do. It isn't love that you feel, but rather love that you make. My pastor told me...to make love to my enemies.

The way in which we interact with people pretty quickly evolves into a sense of whether a person is wanted or loved or not. This place, this church, has to be a place where every single

person is considered a child of God simply by the fact that we were all made in the image of God. Think of that the next time you identify an enemy. Amen.