

Loving Enemies??
Hey, I'm not an Oxymoron!
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How do we know we're loved?

The other day, I stood in the kitchen, talking to my cat (as usual)...

...I'd just gone to the store to pick up some food for him I thought he'd enjoy,

And was letting him know the different flavors.

As I spoke, he'd rub his back along my shin, and I'd playfully grab his tail...

Every once in awhile, giving him a warm rub between the ears.

After stacking the cans in the cupboard, I scooped him up from the floor,

and squeezed him close in my arms.

I looked into his cute orange face, gave him a big smacker-of-a-kiss on the cheek,

and said, "I love you, my friend."

He looked warmly back, smiled at me with his adorably expressive round eyes,

and I set him down on the floor.

And while I watched his cute, furry, little MC Hammer Pants scurry away,

I thought to myself, he has no idea of what I just told him.

Of course he heard the sounds, saw me looking at him when I said it,

and he knew I was trying to *communicate* with him;

But, of course, still not having enrolled in any local English classes (like I've asked him),

he had no idea I just said "I love you."

None of the *words* I'd said had made any sense to him, on their own.

And at first, the thought was a little disappointing. Even a little depressing.

After all, he and I spend a lot of time together. We're companions.

He follows me everywhere---wakes me up in the morning, and goes to sleep at my feet, each night.

We horse around together, and while I'm busy typing away,

He sets himself down by my chair, and keeps me company.

I want him to *know* I love him.

Then here's another moment:

A couple weeks ago, my husband came home from work.

It had been a busy day for him, and he was frazzled.

I was busy making dinner and didn't pay much attention.

Setting his stuff down, he pulled out some papers,

and told me about this new thing he'd done with the books.

Of course, as money often does, this led us to

butt heads until we lost all sense of each other,

And burst into an argument.

And, as these moments tend to move, the argument led to silent tension,

and in this tension we sat the rest of the night,

Tightly laughing through Saturday Night Live skits, in that sad, isolated kind of way,

until we both lied down to sleep.

Lying there in the dark, I realized I'd been wrong in my approach.

I realized I'd overreacted,

And had placed my focus in the wrong place---narrowing in on only the negative---

And that I'd taken something he'd done that was positive, and that had given him some hope,

And I crushed it down in a horribly stealthy way only Sicilian women have truly mastered.

I wanted the apology to mean something,

so I saved it for the morning when we could actually talk;

Lying there in the dark, I rolled over, took him in my arms,

And only said, "I love you."

And after the words left, I couldn't help but cringe inside.

Not because I didn't *mean* it in all fullness of the truth,

But because I knew that I hadn't loved him at all, that night.

In my *heart* I loved him as always. In my *mind*,

I'd loved him just as deeply as any other moment.

But that night, I'd caused him *pain*.

The words felt mismatched as I said them, because *love---*

--in the sense that means the *most---*

Isn't something that exists in the world because of what goes on up here [head] or in here [heart].

Love, in the most *important* sense, isn't just description of how we feel *inside*,

it's the sum total of our *actions* in the world.

Love is verb.

See, thinking about love, I don't have to worry about the fact that my cat, Beans, has slacked in signing up for those English classes...

...And I *do* have to worry about how mismatched those words were, that night with Ky...

...Because both my cat and my husband know I love them, not because of the words---the words are just the sounds of a tongue and teeth---

They both know I love them because of the love I show to them through my *actions*.

And they know this truly *only* through these things,

Because how we are---how we *do*---is how we love.

Today's the last Sunday in our sermon series on Servant Ministry, before we start into the season of Lent.

And boy, did they leave us with a whopper of a reading, or what?

This is definitely a tough one.

Jesus, here in chapter five of Matthew, talks a lot about love.

But he talks about it in a way different than we're used to, doesn't he?

He still speaks of love, but not a love shared with the people we cherish.

Not a love shared with those companions in our lives we don't want to live without.

Just the opposite, he talks about the love we share

with people we have no desire to see. To know.

He talks about sharing love with people we'd rather forget than remember.

He talks about the experience of **LOVING** our **ENEMIES**.

Doesn't make any sense, at quick glance, does it?

Sure, it sounds...kind of ideally *peaceful*... but Jesus---why???

How's this even possible?

It's hard enough to properly love the people we cherish deep in our hearts!

By definition, an ENEMY is someone you're not only NOT on good terms with,

But someone who is, in whatever way, actively working to bring some kind of harm to your life or something you firmly stand for.

Whether it be emotional harm, or physical harm, or ideological harm,

Our enemies are those we *battle* with and *struggle* with

in painfully strained and sometimes even *dangerous* ways.

And Jesus, in this passage, tells us not only *not* to react

with the same kind of harm they're bringing to you... but to *love* them?

We look at this passage and think to ourselves, 'really?? what are we supposed to say?'

'Boy I just love that young man who broke into my garage and stole my car,

while I'm already having a hard time paying my monthly mortgage.'

Or

'Man, I really love that gossipy lady who I just found out

says horrible things behind my back,

that are based only on her selfish desire to make others *hate* me

for reasons that have nothing to do with the truth...

...I've got a real special place in my heart for her.”

Is that what Jesus is asking of us?

Reading these words, if we're honestly looking into them, and not just *noting* them---

---something makes us feel this is all just too counterintuitive, right?

---too contradictory to make any sense.

When it comes to tough passages like this, it takes a lot reading, and re-reading,

and self examination, and some deep meditative consideration...

...Takes a lot of looking at the world, and into our own experiences,

and trying to see how this could possibly ring true to what we've seen and known...

...To even *begin* making sense of the words.

(...It does if we're truly considering making this teaching a part of our own lives, anyway

And don't just like to sound like a nice person by saying we *believe* it's true, right?)

Now, I've heard a lot of different, and very interesting interpretations of this passage.

(Ones I really wish we had time to get into together this morning---

---could do an entire series on this passage alone)

But just *one* not-so-contradictory, not-so-seemingly-illogical truth

that's helped me and others try to sort this one out,

Is that sometimes *painful*, but always *simple* truth we considered together, just before.

This truth that love is a *verb*.

That love, in its most important sense---

--that is, love as something that is *felt* and experienced---

---isn't just something we share in *saying*, Not just something we *think*, or *feel*;

but that love something we *do*.

I don't want to get too bogged down in the tiniest details,

(that can sometimes get too complicated and even convoluted)

But let's just allow ourselves to think together for a second about the wording he uses, here.

(It'll be fun. Where else can we *really* dive deep

into the words of the bible, but here, in this sacred space?)

So let's think together for a sec, about what Jesus says, here.

He says we're supposed to LOVE our ENEMIES.

Is Jesus talking about having a sense of the *warm fuzzies* in our soul,

toward those who hurt us again and again?

Maybe. ... But if we truly cherish a person in our heart,

if we want to be nearer and nearer a person...

...If we truly enjoy the presence of a person, and want only more of them in our lives,

We're not talking about an *enemy*, are we? (As we considered before,

in the definition of the word.)

No, I don't think Jesus is talking so much about the *feeling* of love, here,

As much as he is speaking of the *doing* of love.

Love as a verb. Love as an *action*.

Love as a way of *being* with a person---treating a person.

Love, in its most important sense, as something we *give*, in what we *do*.

Alright, but what's involved in all of this doing?

From verse 38, Jesus says:

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

This passage and the passage from Leviticus, both show us what we do when we love.

They list these acts of giving we experience between each other,

But in Matthew specifically, Christ is compelling us,

leading us, begging of us not to return

the hate or harm that comes to us, through the wrongful actions of another person,

which in the end creates only what?

Only *more* hate, and *more* harm, right?

But, instead, to return an act of hate with an act of love, over and over and over again.

To in fact, give of yourself until there is nothing left of you to give...

... And in doing this, cutting that evil with good.

Replacing darkness with light. And to do this so often and so thoroughly,

That the result can only be more created love in the world.

To *do* this so many times, even, that your persecutor, has no choice left,

but to experience love where before there was none,

And in the end, just like light piercing suddenly through deep darkness,
 Startling their eyes with the unexpected,
 and bringing a new view of the world to their souls.

And this, to me, in no way sounds like a contradiction...

...but something beautifully balanced. Natural. Even logical.

Once again---going back to the beatitudes and Newton (in physics, the laws of motion)
 bringing to the world the force of that *equal but opposite reaction*
 which works to bring life back into balance, and move us forward.

One of the interpretations of this passage I'd mentioned before
 (which I'll just talk about briefly, this morning...sorry, can't help it!

There are too many beautiful things, here, to leave behind!)

One interpretation biblical scholars have adopted widely over only the past twenty years
 or so...

.. it talks about this ACT of love, about this *doing* in love in the face of hate,
 ---the giving of your clothes until you're naked. The turning of the cheek
 after you've already been struck. The going the extra mile---

None of it is meant, by Jesus, to be an act of *submission*, but rather, just the opposite.

That this was actually a way of bringing a sense of shock,
 and even embarrassment to the one who strikes against you.

And the point of that shock, in these *acts* of love,

being to dissuade your enemies---to make them more reluctant---

---to continue on in the harm and wrong they're bringing to you and to the world.

Turning the other cheek would force the offender to strike in a shameful way.

Removing the undergarments leaves the “victim” naked;

but in the ancient culture of Jesus’ world,

the naked person was not shamed: those viewing the naked person were!

Walking the extra mile would make the point that the compulsion

didn’t matter in the first place, and in fact had no real meaning.

This is a powerful love, Jesus speaks of, here.

Far from a simple, and personal, self-confined feeling of the warm fuzzies,

Jesus here is calling us to *do* in different ways.

Ways that will shock the world into experiencing the unexpected,

and overwhelming, and unrelenting love of God,

In the face of all things.

The call of Christ, in our servant ministry to God’s world, is to *give* love.

A love you can feel and see.

Love *experienced* in the most important sense.

One which breaks past the hollow barriers of sentences and phrases.

One which gives us no choice but to *know* we are loved, past all expectation and doubt.

---A love which has the power to change the world. Amen.