

9.28.25 Sermon Transcript – Matthew 5:43-48

On the night of November 14, 1940, during the Blitz, the Germans bombed the English town of Coventry, and hundreds were killed that night. The medieval Cathedral of St. Michael was left in a smoldering ruin. And the next morning, the provost, the priest of St. Michael, whose name was Richard Howard, walked through the rubble. I can only imagine what he may have been experiencing in his heart at what his community had just experienced and seeing the devastation that he knew was not only brought on people's lives, but on the sacred space. He might have been wanting to speak words of vengeance that day, but instead what he did was he took a piece of chalk and behind the altar, he wrote two words. He wrote, "Father, forgive." Father, forgive. He didn't even write, "Father, forgive *them*," as if the other, the enemy, was the only guilty one. Just Father, forgive. Why? Because he wanted it to be clear that all humanity shared responsibility for the cycles of violence and that only God's mercy can break it. And so from that day forward, Coventry chose reconciliation instead of revenge. And out of the ashes of the rubble of the cathedral, they bound two charred timbers together to make a cross, and they fashioned another cross out of nails from the roof. That cross of nails actually became a worldwide symbol for forgiveness. After the war was over, Coventry partnered with churches in Dresden, Germany, to do the work of reconciliation. Today, there are hundreds of communities around the world that carry that Coventry cross, that cross of nails, as a reminder of the way of Jesus – that it's not a way of vengeance, that it is a way of forgiveness and of love. What could have become a real moment of bitterness, of vengeance, became instead a ministry of reconciliation. The church proclaimed in word and indeed the gospel of loving one's enemies. I can't quite imagine what it would have been like to live in that moment, to do what that pastor did, to speak that message, and then to do everything that he could to help his community embody that.

In the scripture passage this morning, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Personally, I think this is the hardest command in all of Scripture. It's difficult enough sometimes to love the people we're closest to, let alone enemies, the ones who insult us, humiliate us, persecute us, make us feel small, or seek to destroy us. Everything in us wants to return hate with hate. I can think of times when people have said some really unkind, mean things to me or have tried to bait me. And there are choice words or choice things that I really, really want to say back. But then I have to pause and remind myself that is not the way of Jesus.

And so a reminder of the context of Jesus's words. These words we read this morning are found in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is preaching to a people who are living under Roman occupation. We've talked about this week after week, that this context really helps us to understand the radical nature of this call to love our enemies. I mean, Roman soldiers could humiliate you on the street. They could force you to carry their pack. They could take your cloak, strike your cheek, all of this. There was heavy taxation, and violent punishments were a daily reality. There was the constant threat of force. And so in response, some people were teaching not only to love your neighbor, but to hate your enemy, to hate the one who was the occupying force. And when we think about it, well, weren't they justified in that response?

Doesn't that make sense? I'm sure that for most of us, if we were living in that situation, it would be really difficult to not hate the ones who were doing all of these things. But Jesus refuses that script. He refuses the script of Rome's domination, but he also refuses the script of sectarian hatred of enemies. So instead, he offers another way, the way of love, the way of loving one's enemies, which is not surrender, but it's also not revenge.

It's love that resists hatred and insists that love is the way. And love is the way to keep one's soul free from corruption, free to choose how one lives and moves in the world. But I want to pause here for a minute and define love, because this is a word that can mean so many different things, things to so many different people. I mean, we live in a time where we say we love all kinds of things, like: I love cookies, I love cake, I love naps, I love to drink coffee. I love to read fantasy books. Those are things that I really enjoy. But that's not what love means. I can say, "I love my family, I love my children." And that is certainly a type of love. But Jesus is speaking about a particular type of love when he says, love your enemies.

Some of you may know that in the Greek there are a bunch of different words for love and they mean different things. There's *eros* which means desire, or romantic love, that kind of thing. There's *philia* which is friendship love, the way that you would love a sibling or a close friend. There's *storge* which is like familial love, how you love and care for your family. But then there's *agape* love. And that is the word that Jesus uses in this passage. And that word, *agape*, is the word for the self-giving, unconditional action kind of love. *Agape* doesn't mean having warm, fuzzy feelings towards friends or towards enemies. It means choosing the good of the other even when they are against you.

That's the kind of love that Jesus demonstrates for us. It's unconditional. It's always there. It's not based on whether or not we deserves it. It's not retaliatory in any way. It refuses to mirror violence or hatred. It's also creative love. It opens up new possibilities for relationship, and it's rooted in God's own heart. It's the love demonstrated in Jesus Christ: "While we were yet sinners, while we were enemies of God, Christ died for us." That unconditional self-giving action. Martin Luther King Jr. Said it like this: he said, "Agape is understanding, creative redemptive goodwill for all people. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return."

We've been referencing Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* over these last few weeks. And he says this of hatred: He says, "In the end, hatred destroys the core of the life of the hater. It blinds the individual to all values, even as it increases the necessity for the recognition of values." In other words, hatred feels powerful for a moment, but it corrodes the soul. It, in fact, puts us in chains. It makes us resemble the very thing that we despise. Thurman says even more that Jesus calls us to a more revolutionary path. He says the religion of Jesus makes the love ethic central. It insists that the hater does not decide the terms of our response. The core of life is to be found in love and in love alone. In other words, we do not allow one who is hating to control our own lives and our own choices. We, ourselves, always have the choice to love in the way of Jesus. Love is not weakness. It is strength. It is the power of God. It is the only thing that doesn't boomerang back on us, unlike hatred. When we toss hatred out, it's coming right back at us.

Back in 2017, Darick and I went to Israel and Palestine for the first time. While we were there, the first few days we spent in the West Bank and we had the opportunity to visit the farm of a Palestinian Christian family. Their farm is called Tent of Nations Farm. And this is a family-owned farm. They've had this land, this farm, since 1916. They first acquired it back when the Ottoman Empire was still in power. In recent decades there have been settlements that have gone in the West Bank around them. And I don't know if you know much about the situation over there, but the West Bank is Palestinian territory and there is an international agreement that Israel would not encroach upon that land. But over the years there have been settlements, Israeli settlements, that have gone on to the land. Much of the international community recognizes that this is an illegal practice. But in any case, this farm, Tent of Nations, is now surrounded on all sides by settlements. And they have been in a decades long legal battle to prove that this is, in fact, their land. And in all of that time they have had demolition orders put on the buildings on their property. They have not had electric to their property in a really long time. They have had some of their olive orchards bulldozed to the ground. And the family themselves have experienced violence. Daoud, who's the face of their social justice ministries, just a couple years ago, he was beaten within an inch of his life.

And people of this farm, this Tent of Nations farm, are a group of Christians. Their mission is to work for justice in their community. They do a lot of community work of helping to empower women. They run summer camps for younger generations, they host work camps. They do all kinds of good for their community. And yet they have experienced a lot of violence and hostility, both legally and physically. Their very livelihood and well-being, are being attacked. But the thing that struck me about being there and listening to their story and seeing the farm was they are Christians who are committed to the way of Jesus, to the way of nonviolence. And so even though they themselves have experienced different types of violence directed at them, they refuse to respond in kind. In fact, their motto that have on a rock at the entrance of their farm says, "We refuse to be enemies." This is the central idea that they hold in their hearts because they believe that it is the way of Jesus. For me, the Nasser family of the Tent of Nations Farm are a living example of what Jesus tells us in today's passage. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Refuse to be enemies. The Nassers could meet hatred with hatred. They could give up, but instead they collect rainwater in cisterns and they replant the olive trees after destruction, and they continue to welcome visitors from all over the world. They continue to strive to empower people, especially vulnerable people in their own community. Their motto, "we refuse to be enemies," is not sentimental, it's not something reflecting warm fuzzy feelings, but it reflects a commitment to following the way of Jesus, to living in the love of Jesus. It's a living example of that agape love.

And so when Jesus commands us to love our enemies, he's not asking us to roll over and accept is injustice, but he is giving us a revolutionary form of resistance in that love. It comes in the form of refusing to let the one who is hating decide who we are and saying, "You do not have power over me and my choice. I will choose love. I will not play into this feedback loop of hatred." It's a refusal to let that dictate our identity, and it's a refusal to perpetuate the cycle of violence.

As Howard Thurman says, “Jesus recognized with authentic realism that love of one's enemy is the only means by which hatred may be removed from the life the hater.” I'm going to read that one more time. “Love of one's enemy is the only means by which hatred may be removed from the life of the hater.” Love. Love is the way of freedom. Love disarms, love disrupts.

And so what does that mean for us today when our politics tempt us to demonize one another? We refuse to be enemies. When racism and division tear apart our communities, we refuse to be enemies. When fear and violence rise in our culture, we refuse to be enemies. That does not mean we stop resisting injustice, but it means that we resist in the spirit of Christ, with integrity and with compassion, not with hatred or with vengeance.

I think back to the Coventry community that out of the ashes they bound together those charred timbers in the shape of a cross. They carried the cross in the form of the nails of the destroyed roof as a sign of living in that Christ-like love. Jesus ends the passage today with one of these lines that I think is one of the hardest lines in scripture. He says, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” What he's talking about there is being made perfect in love and embodying the way of Jesus. Perfect here means complete, mature – to love as God loves, without partiality; to embody that indiscriminate love of God that sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. And so we say with Jesus, we say with Howard Thurman, we say with the Nasser family of the Tent of Nations Farm: “We refuse to be enemies. We choose that disarming power of love. We are children of God, and so are you.” Amen.