

It's Not Easy

Psalm 42, Matthew 5:21-26

Center Church, Hartford

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You may have heard about the kerfuffle at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington DC last week. The main speaker, a politically conservative social scientist and professor at Harvard named Arthur Brooks, gave a very compelling speech about the meanness and divisiveness plaguing our society. He spoke about the widespread practice of people of all political persuasions treating one another with contempt, quickly calling people “stupid and evil” and denying their humanity. The breakfast fell on the day after the end of the Impeachment trial, and Brooks made a heartfelt plea for people to follow Jesus’ call to love your enemies.

Then the President got up and said, “Arthur, I don’t know if I agree with you.” Then he went on, remember this is a Prayer Breakfast, to lambaste those he perceived to be his enemies, particularly Mitt Romney and Nancy Pelosi. He ended by saying that he apologized to the religious people in the room who might disagree with him, saying “It’s not easy when they impeach you for nothing, and you’re supposed to like them.”

Just quickly, I want to make clear that Jesus didn’t say “like your enemies.” That would be a different matter. He said “love your enemies.” See them as human beings created in the image of God and love them as you have been loved. We are loved with grace, because, occasionally, God might think any one of **us** was an enemy to God’s aims for the world. Forgiveness and reconciliation are implied in this love, as they are in Jesus’ words that we heard from Matthew today.

But I want to say that I actually understand the President’s feelings in that moment. I think some of the truest words he ever spoke were, “It’s not easy.”

He’s right.

Most of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount is not easy (we get the “love your enemies” part in the same chapter as what we read today as well as “give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you”). Many of these words we ignore most of the time, so I think we need to be a bit slow to condemn the President, on this account anyway, if we do so before being honest about our own lives (remember when Jesus says to take the log out of your own eye before trying to remove what you perceive to be a toothpick in your neighbor’s eye?).

This is how Eugene Peterson’s contemporary translation of the New Testament renders Jesus’ words we just heard.

“You’re familiar with the command to the ancients ‘Do not murder.’ I am telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you might just find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill. This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and

work things out with God. Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with them. After all, if you leave the first move to them, knowing their track record, you're likely to end up in court, maybe even jail."

I am going to confess to you that I have never left worship when I have remembered that I have a relationship that needs to be healed. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I want you to consider if you have ever done this, either.

I'm going to confess that I sometimes don't make the first move, or any move at all, to reconcile with someone who perceives me to be **their** enemy or whom I perceive to be **my** enemy. Again, I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but maybe you have this problem with conflict resolution, too?

I was tempted at this point in the service to simply ask you to leave now and take care of any conflict or grudge or division or estrangement that might exist in your life. If you want to go do that, I wish you blessings. What I **am** going to do is ask you to sit in silence for a few moments before we turn to prayer. In those prayers, we will pray for ourselves to have the kind of courage which is not easy, the kind of courage Jesus calls on us to have in our relationships with other people. The kind of humility Jesus calls on us to have in these relationships. The kind of commitment to the possibility of "love," even if there is not much possibility of "like."

Let's be quiet together for a few minutes and ponder, each of us considering our own life and relationships and where things stand right now with the people in our lives.

Peterson draws the 5th chapter of Matthew, the first of three which contain the summary of Jesus' teachings we call the "Sermon on the Mount," to a close by translating that difficult verse telling us to be perfect as God is perfect in this way:

"Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

The way God lives toward you.

Let us pray:

Thank you, Loving God, that in a world where it seems the moral compass has lost true north, you remind us of a way to live that grounds us in your love. But oh, it is so hard to try to live this way. Forgive us, especially when we don't even try. Forgive us when we are afraid to fail. Forgive us when our anger or desire for revenge get the best of us.

In this moment, we come to you and name those people with whom we have had an argument, a struggle, a broken relationship, an estrangement. Those we have hurt and those who have hurt us. We give their names to you asking that you would bless them, and give both them and us the courage, the humility and the commitment to love to seek healing. Hear us now as we say aloud or silently, those names (pause).

Strong and merciful God, we can't do this without you. We know that the repair of the world starts with each relationship, that the stakes are high, and we simply can't do it alone.

Help us to actually be open to your help, believing that you walk beside us when life is most challenging. (pause)

We also pray today for all those whose lives are challenging in different ways. Those ill in body, mind or spirit. Those in the midst of war or oppression. Those caught in addictions or abuse. Those hungry and homeless, especially those who will come to the dinner at our Church House tonight and those we have hosted and will host in the Monday night shelter. Hear us as we raise the names of those who need your healing love. (pause).

We pray for this congregation, loving God. Give us the wisdom and discernment, the joy, the energy, the hope and the faith we need to continue to serve you in old and new ways. Be with all our leaders and send us people who need to be here. Be especially with the Search Team as they seek new leadership.

All these prayers, spoken and unspoken, we lift to you in the name and words of Jesus.