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First Presbyterian Church, Lincoln, NE
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LOVING YOUR ENEMIES, OR HOW TO HEAP BURNING COALS ON THEIR HEADS

Matthew 5:38-48

Romans 12:17-21

9 Chickweed Lane, by Brooke McEldowney, had this wonderful comic strip that every pet lover can relate to. A dog and a cat are talking, and the dog is instructing the cat in how to relate to their owners. The trick, he said, with being a pet is that no matter what the offence, we can never respond with overt aggression ... no biting, clawing, or chasing. Nor with threatened aggression ... no growling, hissing or snarling. So the cat asks, "what do we have left?" To which the dog says "passive aggression. Shedding."

What does this have to do with the Sermon on the Mount? Well, this is how many people have interpreted the first part of today's text. As Christians, we are not to stoop to the level of our enemies, and return violence for violence. No - we'll get them in other ways. Take what Jesus says about someone forcing you to go one mile. Roman soldiers could legally force you to carry their pack and supplies for one mile. But no farther. In fact they would get in trouble if they made you carry it even farther. So if a Roman soldier forces me to carry his pack for one mile - I'm going to carry it for two, and he'll get in trouble! Sweet justice, right?

Or what Jesus says about someone suing you for your coat - give him your tunic as well. Well, some people only wore two pieces of clothing at a time - a coat and a tunic. So if someone sues you for your coat, and you give him your tunic - you end up standing there naked in front of everyone. Now you might think that is a bad thing - but in the culture of Jesus' day - if someone was naked because of what you did - no one looked down on the naked person, they looked down on you - you were the one who was shamed by the other person's nakedness. And shame in that day, was a fate worse than death.

Passive aggressiveness. It's not the most "loving" thing to do, is it?

So what can we do? Well, we can kill them with kindness. It's like Paul said - "*if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.*" If you are my enemy, I am going to go out of my way to be so nice to you it will eat you up inside. I'm going to drop gifts by the house, help you when you haven't asked, pray for you ... and let you know I'm praying that God will bless you ... and you won't have grounds to complain about anything because whose going to listen to someone complaining

about someone being nice to them? But I know it's going to eat you up inside. This is gift-wrapped revenge! Is this what Jesus meant by loving your enemies?

Paul was quoting from Proverbs 25:22, and this idea of heaping hot coals on your enemy's head may refer to an Egyptian custom, in which a guilty person carried a basin of burning coals on his head as a sign of his repentance. So I will be kind to you, I will do nice things for you, all in the hopes that you will see the error of your ways and repent. I am on a mission to change you!

Is that what it means to love your enemies, to try to manipulate them to do what you want them to do - even if it's a good thing?

These are the kinds of things we struggle with, when faced with not so nice people, and especially, people who have harmed us or our families. We know that revenge is not the response we are called to give - but sometimes, we just want to hurt the one who hurt us.

I remember a news story where the father of girl who had just been murdered was being interviewed. The reporter asked him what he thought should happen to the man who killed her. And I'll never forget what he said - he said, "Well, I'm a Christian, so of course I believe in an eye for an eye."

I hope that he really doesn't believe that is the Christian way of responding to violence! But I suspect he wasn't speaking so much from his faith, as from his hurt.

We know that such responses seldom bring an end to the hurt, or the violence. Instead it perpetuates the cycle of violence - you hurt me, so I'll hurt you - and you come right back at me, and it never ends! Because someone is always hurt.

The Sermon on the Mount basically presents us with two ways of being in the world:

1. The 1st is to perpetuate the violence. To continue that cycle of revenge and let our emotions control our reactions. That is an option.
2. Or we can choose the way of faith, which is NOT to return violence for violence. Don't resist an evil person. Don't strike back. This does not mean we have to be a doormat. Look at what Jesus says about turning the other cheek - if someone hits you on your right cheek, turn to him your left as well.

Most people are right handed, if someone hit you on the right cheek, they would have to slap you with the back of their hand - you would only do that to someone whom you considered beneath you. If you stood up and said "hit me on my left cheek" - you would be telling them "treat me like an equal."

That is not the act of a weakling. That takes courage - but it also takes confidence - you have to know that you have a choice - you can cower, you can lash out in anger, or you can respond with confidence, with restraint, without anger and ultimately, with strength.

But you can't stop there. It's one thing to not fight back. It's one thing to challenge your enemy to treat you as an equal. Jesus challenges us to go one step further, and return good for evil. This is not killing them with kindness. It is not being kind in order to manipulate them into seeing the error of their ways. It is simply loving them, with the same kind of love God has for us - who makes the sun shine on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

I know this this doesn't give us the instant gratification that revenge gives us.
It can often be thankless.

And it can even open us up to be hurt. I'm sure you've heard the expression, "no good deed goes unpunished."

But love is a powerful force. When we choose to respond with love instead of revenge, even love instead of simply walking away, we invoke the powerful force of God's love, which has the power to create a new reality - one in which healing and reconciliation are possible - not because we make it happen, but because when we choose to respond with the force of God's love, we create space for God to work. And God can do wonders with that space.

Daryl Davis is an African-American jazz musician, and he counts among his friends some of the top leaders in the KKK. He doesn't agree with their beliefs or agendas, but he sits down with them, and he listens to them. And sometimes, they listen to him, and what he found was they could respect each other, and even be friends, even if they didn't agree. And in that space created by their mutual respect, a number of them have left the Klan.

You know Rabbi Michael Weisner, who used to be at the South Street Temple here in Lincoln - he reached out to Klan member Larry Trapp when he was sick, even though Trapp had harassed and threatened him for years. Weisner's willingness to love his enemy created space for God to work, until Trapp finally made a turn in his life, and the two men became deep friends.

This is what can happen when we dare to love our enemies, without an agenda, without expectation, and without condition. The goal is to do what Paul says in Romans 12:14: "bless those who persecute you." Think about what it means to bless those who persecute you. To bring good to those who hate you. To give food to those who are hungry. If you're going to give food to a hungry enemy - you have to know he is hungry.

Loving our enemies requires us to see their behavior, not as evil, but as symbolic of a hunger

deep inside them - maybe a hunger for relevance, maybe a hunger to feel in control, or a hunger to feel alive. The kind of love that Christ calls us to have for our enemies, is one that gives life - and therefore it is not manipulative. It is not gift-wrapped revenge. It is powerful, insightful, and intentional action to lift up, and affirm, and celebrate, to nourish and give life to another.

I wonder if Paul was actually talking about this when he talked about heaping burning coals on his enemy's head? Do you know how people carried things in the Middle East in Jesus' day? They carried almost everything on their heads - water, food - even burning coals. If your fire went out, you would take a pot, put it on your head, and go to your neighbor, and your neighbor would heap burning coals on your head, so that you could have fire. In the same way, we are to extend warmth and life to others, even to our enemies.¹

What does that kind of love look like? How do we heap burning coals on the heads of our enemies? How about by treating them as friends.

- If they are lonely, visit them.
- If they need help getting to the store, offer to take them.
- Invite them over for dinner.
- Listen to them - try to understand them.
- Get to know them.
- Respect them.

It's probably not going to be easy - Jesus said "turn the other cheek." He never promised that they wouldn't take us up on the offer and hit us again. Or they may ignore us. Or they may gossip about us. But we can't let their possible response make us forget who we are. We are disciples of Jesus Christ. We don't have to be captive to the reactive way of this world. We have the freedom to choose a better way, and in doing so, to be a part of God's work in this world. Be that one who chooses the better way.

¹ Earl F. Palmer, [The Enormous Exception: Meeting Christ in the Sermon on the Mount](#). Pg. 56.