

Matthew 5:43-48
Love More Powerful Than Hate
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6-21-15

This morning, we are continuing our series of messages on the activity and evidence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In the Old Testament, the Spirit is described as the *ruach*, the breath of God, blowing over and through creation—not always calm and peaceably as we saw with Jonah a few weeks ago. Sometimes God steamrolls us with his presence, and sometimes the world steamrolls us and all we can do is look to God. This we saw once again this week, and we are left asking: “Holy Spirit, what are you doing in the midst of this? In the midst of us?”

And so we bring ourselves before Almighty God for a word of hope, to have our faith rekindled. We come because what the world around us needs is *super-human*, something for which we’re not fully equipped; something so real, and yet somehow other-worldly. What we need the mighty hand of God to do in us is show us how to love.

So as we once again place our lives before God’s Word, let us begin with prayer.

Holy Spirit, into your presence we now come—meet us here. Kindle within us the fire of your love for others, those who are easy to love and those who are not. Burn away the dross from our lives and fill that reworked space with your supernatural power that is only possible by the power of your Spirit. This we pray not in our own power, but in the power of your Spirit at work within us. Amen.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord lasts forever. Amen.

To begin, on this Father’s Day, I want you to turn to your neighbor and tell them your favorite superhero. By a show of hands or a nod of the head, how many of you dads out there have ever aspired to be a superhero figure to your children? All of you, I would guess, because as Jerry Seinfeld brilliantly puts it, when men are growing up Batman, Spiderman, Superman, these aren’t fantasies, these are options. On some level, all of us think of ourselves as low-level super heroes. This is why, invariably, all of us will at one time or another, take on a house project or a moving project that is way beyond our

capacity—because where there’s a will there’s a way (and a wife in the background rolling her eyes).

At one point or another, all children have assigned super hero qualities to their parents, and all parents have aspired to be heroic.

In our scripture passage this morning, Jesus presents a new vision of what it means to be heroic.

You see, then and now, heroes are those who perform great feats of strength, sacrifice, loyalty—we love to read about Samson, Gideon, Ruth, and Elijah. We love great stories of heroism, of justice, stories where the good guy wins and the bad guys get what’s coming to them. There is something that seems so natural about loyalty among friends and contempt toward one’s enemy.

Only now Jesus steps in with a command that’s truly supernatural.

“You’ve heard it said, love your neighbors, hate your enemies,” (this is the classic hero archetype) **“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

Throughout his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gradually ups the ante. He begins by comforting the afflicted, the meek, the broken-hearted; Jesus finishes this section with its most challenging and countercultural statement—love your enemy.

This is not what they learned in Torah 101. In fact, not only are they permitted to hate their own enemies, but they’re given the green light to hate God’s enemies, too. In fact, there is a first century Jewish document called the *Birkath ha-Minim* that says: “*for persecutors of Yahweh and Yahweh’s people let there be no hope, let their names be blotted out of the book of the living.*” Even the great command of the Old Testament was not a universal one. Love was only for those who were fellow Jews and friends of the Jews.

This week, our hearts were broken once again as we heard the story of an extremely misguided young man with evil in his heart who entered the Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC.

When Jesus stands before his audience in Matthew 5 and declares a new command, he says something that is completely unheard of: Love your enemy. Resist the urge to retaliate and seek retribution. Instead of lashing out, turn in with prayer. You see, because the problem with hatred, even that which is turned towards the most righteous of causes, is that it always sees *others* as the main problem. Out of our own self-righteousness we condemn others, and this is the thinking that infects all our crusades.

Standing before an angry crowd bent upon retaliation and justice toward the actions of a woman, Jesus was not drawn into the heat of the moment. Rather with poise and peace,

he knelt down in the sand and said, “Whoever is without sin, go ahead and cast the first stone.” Poise in the heat of the moment, prayer in place of penalty.

This week in a courtroom in Charleston, South Carolina, the bond hearing took place for Mr. Roof. After an initial statement made by the Chief Magistrate James Gosnell, and the charges read against him, something remarkable happened. As they sat facing a television screen, through which the image of the hate-filled young man who joined the midweek Bible study and prayer meeting, only to turn and open fire upon the participants, the families of his victims saw the face of evil, the face of entrenched racism, the face that represents in a small way the monumental challenge we still face in our country of discrimination and prejudice, they were each given the opportunity make a statement.

One by one, spouses, children, siblings and parents stepped forward, and with their first opportunity to confront the young man who turned their worlds upside down Wednesday evening, what followed was nothing short of God’s Holy Spirit flowing through that room. These men and women stepped forward looked into his eyes, and with sadness and devastation in their voices offered words of forgiveness. Even though you took everything from us, we forgive you. We refuse, as you did, to choose hatred over love.

Their words were enacted prayer, filled with heartache for what was lost, but spoke of a greater hope, a greater God, a greater peace that comes when they chose to speak words of love to their enemy.

Jesus, and only Jesus, frees us from having to decide who to love and who not to love. Jesus frees us from the calculations we make of who to be warm and friendly to and who to be hostile to; Jesus frees us from having to decide whom we love conditionally and whom we love unconditionally. He takes these decisions right out of our hands when he says God makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the good guys and the bad guys, and anyone upon whom the sun shines and the rain falls, anyone who makes their home within God’s good creation—these are the ones you love.

You see, this is what makes Christianity so salty, so different, so useful in the meat of the world. Jesus says: “What is so special about doing the thing that comes naturally to all of us? What kind of reward should I give you for that?” Jesus steps into our love-for-love, good-for-good, evil-for-evil reciprocity and says, “I want to take you one step further. I want to take the road that is truly revolutionary and invite you not to do what comes natural, but un-natural...even super-natural. I want you to love and pray for your enemies.”

If we are willing to follow Jesus in this way, he will take us to the edge of our own strength. He will take us to that place of confusion, where many in Charleston are right this moment, he will take us to the point where it is no longer we who are able to love, and there we will meet the Holy Spirit. In our inability to muster the strength and the courage to forgive, the Holy Spirit takes that ember that is all but snuffed out and kindles within us a fire of God’s love. Because we remember that it was while we were yet in our sins, while we were enemies to God in our sin, Christ demonstrated his love by taking our

place on trial, and accepting the punishment that we deserved, and showing us the way of forgiveness.

Until we allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit to the end of our capacity for love, not just with our enemies, but with those around us who challenge our capacity for love; until we led to that place where we, in our own strength, are no longer capable of showing love, and in that moment cry out for God's help in doing what Jesus tells us to do. We will not fully understand the depth of our own brokenness and the beauty of our redemption.

It's easy to love those who are lovely. Loving the unlovable, on the other hand, will take you to the place of true communion with the Holy Spirit, because loving our enemies is not natural.

So do you see how this is beginning to sound more and more superhero-like?

Throughout our history, there have been examples of people who have lovingly and prayerfully resisted their enemies, who have prayed, "Lord, I don't believe that so and so is thinking correctly, I don't think they're in their right mind, please help them see the light, please help them to turn from their ways." In fact, sometimes it's in the peaceful resistance of people like MLK, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church Movement of World War II, Ghandi, and even some of the modern day resistance movements that have stood in the way of evil to try and keep them from themselves. Sometimes loving our neighbor means getting in the way of them hurting themselves, or others.

In his book *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry tells the story of Jonah Crow, the barber of Port William Kentucky. In his schooling, Crow finds himself at a Christian College training to be a preacher when he comes to a realization that challenges him to the core of his being. "Wasn't it in fact St. Paul who said in the twelfth chapter of his letter to the Romans who said, 'if possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.' And was it not our Lord who said, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." Which of these is the more demanding, the more challenging, which is closer to the heart of God?

That's why St. Paul, in I Corinthians 13 and Galatians 5, says that among the gifts of faith, the most important is love. And the one who gives that gift, and the one who enables it to flourish and soar to the heavens is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who kindles within us the ability to love one another. It's the Holy Spirit who, when our passions are burning with anger and resentment towards our enemies, enables us to see them as precious children of God for whom Christ Jesus also came and died.

The courage to love one another, even if that other is your enemy, is a gift of the Holy Spirit within you. On this Father's Day, be encouraged that you can do the heroic for your children, for your family, for your community by doing something other-worldly. You can, in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit, love your neighbor.