

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“ENEMIES ARE A FACT OF LIFE”  
FEBRUARY 20, 2011  
Matthew 5:38-48  
ALL SERVICES**

Enemies are fact of life. A nation knows who its friends are and who its enemies are among the other nations of the world. In nature there are “natural” enemies. Athletic teams and their fans are clear about who their enemies are in the world of competitive sports. Do you have enemies? Do you have an “**enemies list**”? Would you have any difficulty creating one? In 1984 Richard M. Nixon said to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, “**As far as I am concerned now, I have no enemies in the press whatsoever.**” What can we do about our enemies?

Religious and moral codes all the way back to ancient times have emphasized fair play. Treat others as they treat you. “*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.*” Jesus changed all that. He centered faith and morality on love. He instructed us to treat others the way you want them to treat you.

Enemies are intolerable. At best, they are unpleasant. At worst, they are life-threatening. Something must be done. The simplest answer is often the best answer. So, from time immemorial we have set out to destroy our enemies. The result has been war and more war. There must be more effective ways of destroying our enemies.

The Fifth Commandment is short, but it is not simple: “*Thou shalt not kill.*” It seems simple. One thing we cannot do about our enemies is kill them. So, how are we to understand this commandment when it comes to war? What does it mean regarding capital punishment? Does the commandment prohibit suicide? The assassination of a political despot? What about euthanasia? A multitude of problems begin to appear in response to this simple four-word commandment!

An intellectual exercise often engaged in by seminary and divinity school students is to try to come up with theoretical exceptions to these famous Ten Commandments. Wouldn't self-defense, in some situations, represent an exception to the rule, "***Thou shalt not kill***"? What if a homicidal maniac were about to kill an innocent child? Couldn't such a situation involve factors that would mitigate against an absolute, no-exceptions prohibition against killing? Such questions are important if we are to avoid premature assumptions and erroneous judgments. Are there exceptions to every rule?

Jesus provides us with some significant help here. He consistently insists that the "***spirit***" of the law should be sought and, when found, should be given precedence over the "***letter***" of the law. We tried to make that case last week with law and grace. The source of sin is the human heart. An incidence of murder does not begin with the murderous act. Back of the act is a negative emotion, a malicious thought, or a destructive impulse. Jesus says, "***You have heard it said, 'Do not kill,' but I say whoever is angry with another will come under judgment.***" (Mt 5:21-22)

Anger begins early in life. A child finds that the new brother or sister represents competition. "***If I did not have a sister,***" the child thinks, "***I would get more ice cream. But now I have to share with her.***" This same thinking causes tensions throughout human society. The biblical story of Cain and Abel comes from the very beginning of the human saga, and is a classic example. Cain was convinced that he was not getting enough of life's goods because of his brother, Abel. Cain reasoned that he could have what he wanted only if Abel disappeared. Cain saw Abel as his enemy, and destroyed him. We have enemies for essentially the same reason. Someone becomes an enemy when we decide that that person is responsible for our unhappiness. Our enemies come from our own unhappiness. Nels F.S. Ferre, one of the charter members of the Editorial Council of **THEOLOGY TODAY** taught at both Andover Newton Theological School and Vanderbilt University said that someone "***who experiences no genuine satisfaction in life does not want peace.***" We even "***court war to escape meaninglessness and boredom, to be relieved of fear and frustration.***" Killing the presumed "***enemy,***" however, does not solve the problem, but makes it infinitely worse. In destroying another person we unleash demons in our lives and we discover to our horror that we have acted self-destructively.

Cain was correct about one thing. Something in his relationship with Abel needed to change. It was not Abel who needed to be sacrificed, however. It was Cain. It is not that Cain needed to literally destroy himself, but he needed to

sacrifice his own desires for the sake of his relationship with Abel. Cain needed to rise above his infantile self-centeredness. This would not only enhance his relationship with Abel, it would free Cain for a fuller experience of life's meaning and possibilities.

When commandments are stated negatively - - as in, "*Thou shalt not kill*" - - we sometimes fail to see that their intention is positive. God gave the Hebrews commandments for their own good, to enhance every aspect of their lives. Killing is not bad only for the victim, as we have seen. What we give, we receive. If we could avoid destroying ourselves, we could also avoid destroying another person.

Jesus gives us a way of getting rid of our enemies. It is to treat them as friends. When your enemy becomes your friend, you have "**destroyed**" your enemy. Jesus says, "*Love your enemies.*" You don't have to like them; you just have to love them! Where is the virtue in loving only those who love you? Now, a major difficulty we have in understanding what Jesus is saying comes from our mistaken assumption that love is a feeling. Certainly feelings are a part of loving and being loved, but love can also be a function of the will. We can *choose* to love. In fact, consider how monstrous human life would become if we acted solely on our emotions. We have the power to transcend our feelings. Sometimes the most loving things we do require us to set aside certain of our feelings. What is most admirable, acting compassionately because you have strong feelings of sympathy, or acting compassionately by transcending negative feelings you know to be unworthy?

It is our destiny to be fully human, created in the image of God. How do we become human - - fully human, truly human? By acknowledging our commonality with every other person as God's beloved children. By transcending our first impressions and seeing each person we meet as a beloved child of God. And by finding the "**sister**" or the "**brother**" in that person. This is Christ's way of destroying our enemies.

Love is something we do, not merely something we feel. Love is an act of the will, not merely a stirring of the heart. We are not commanded to like our enemies, which may be impossible, but to love them. Love is a commandment, not merely a sentiment. Love is the only way to fulfill the intention of all the commandments. Love does the work of all the virtues because love never fails.

We are commanded to be holy as God is holy. It seems like an impossible demand. God is transcendent. God is omnipotent. God is omniscient. But the

New Testament's primary claim is that God is love. Love, then, is an expression of God's holiness that we can emulate. The Apostle Paul makes the astonishing claim in 1 Corinthians, chapter 3, that we are the temple of God. We are the visible presence of God on earth, not some cathedral or shrine. The Spirit of God dwells in us as the presence of love. Therefore, we are reminders of the "*Holy*".