

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 119:41-44

New Testament lesson: Matthew 5:43-48

Abraham Lincoln was once criticized by an associate for his attitude toward political enemies. The associate asked, “Why do you always make friends of them? You should destroy them!” Lincoln replied, “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?”¹ I like that. It makes sense – make your enemy your friend and you’ve gotten rid of an enemy. But that’s not what Jesus is teaching in our New Testament lesson for today.

Our New Testament lesson is not about us and our enemies. It’s about us and our God. Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you....” If that teaching is not about us and our enemies then what are we to take away from it?

The first clue that this is about us and God – and not us and others – is where Jesus says, “... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven....” He doesn’t say, “Love your enemies so that they will become your friends,” though that would be great. But making friends out of enemies is not the reason we should love them. We should love our enemies because God first loved us. God loves us even when we go against God’s will.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the day we follow Jesus triumphantly into Jerusalem shouting “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”

And then comes Maundy Thursday, when one of us betrays Jesus to his enemies. And then Good Friday, when we make it clear to ourselves and all the world just what kind of evil we are capable of as human beings, evil toward each other and evil toward God, crucifying the Lord. God knows how evil people can be, and God loves us in spite of our misguided, disobedient, defiant and, yes, even hateful nature. “... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” knowing that there but for the grace of God is you – and me. We are all capable of and guilty of defying the Lord. And in Christ, we are called to be better than that.

In Christ, God sees us as better than that, better than we are, because we are seen by God through the lens of Jesus Christ and the perfect love he embodies. In light of that, how can we fail to love our enemies and pray for them? That’s what the Lord does for us in loving us and praying for us.

¹ Greg Laurie, “Turn your enemies into friends,” *WorldNetDaily*, November 10, 2007, wnd.com.

And as God's children – as brothers and sisters in Christ – that's what we are called to do for others, whether they are friends, enemies, or strangers. So if Jesus' command to love our enemies has nothing to do with us turning them into friends, than what are we to make of those who do evil and might be seen as our enemies? Thank God, Jesus has an answer for that, too.

Jesus says, God "makes (the) sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." Now I've got to tell you, when I first read that I thought of the most evil person imaginable enjoying the same sun and rain that I and all you good people enjoy. Not a very satisfying thought. I don't know about you, but I want people who are evil to be punished – and saved if they are open to it. But certainly not left to enjoy the warm rays of sun and the quenching coolness of the rain. And then I remembered this rather amusing story and the message behind it.

A priest once traveled to see a renowned spiritual teacher, to spend time on a retreat with him. "Master," he said, "I come to you seeking enlightenment." "Well, then," said the master, "for the first exercise of your retreat, go into the courtyard, tilt your head back, stretch out your arms and wait until I come for you." Just as the priest arranged himself in that position, the rains came. And it rained. And it rained. And it rained. Finally, the old master came back. "Well, priest," he asked, "have you been enlightened today?" "Are you serious?" asked the priest. "I've been standing here with my head up in the rain for an hour. I'm soaking wet. I feel like a fool!" The master said, "Well, priest, for the first day of a retreat that sounds to me like great enlightenment."² God "makes (the) sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

How we enjoy that sun and rain and what we get out of the experience depends on God and our relationship with God. The sun can warm or burn. Rain can quench or drown and cleanse. It is not up to us to punish people who are evil. That's up to God. Oh, we may be instrumental in God turning someone toward the light, but it's still God's doing, not ours.

So what is our role in all of this good and evil stuff? Umm, our role is to be good, not evil. And not only good, but perfect. Perfect! You've got to be kidding me – what's God thinking!?! But here it is, right from the Bible: "Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect." What does that mean? Jesus is talking about love – love your enemies. When Jesus says, "Be perfect," he's saying show perfect, unconditional love for all people, just like God shows unconditional love for you. "For if you love those who love you," says Jesus, "what reward do you have?" In other words, love takes sacrifice. And perfect, unconditional love takes Jesus.

It is only in Christ that we can love one another as we should. In Christ, God loves us over and beyond our sins – over and beyond our defiant and misguided ways. "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." That's John 3:16.

² Joan Chittister, *Songs of the Heart: Reflections on the Psalms* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2011), 23-24.

It is God's love that saves the world. And in Christ, we are called to show that love, even to enemies, for the sake of the Lord, and for the sake of our world, which the Lord so loves. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy and merciful God, we thank you for the gifts of the season of Lent.

Thank you for the call to slow down, to quiet the voices that vie for our attention. Help us to be still and to enjoy the presence of your Spirit.

Thank you for the invitation to examine our hearts and lives, to take stock of our relationships, our loves and our fears.

Grant us courage to address the stumbling-blocks that pop up in our lives, getting in the way of our closeness to you.

We want to be close to you, Lord, and have nothing stand in our way. We pray for those who are experiencing the pain of loss and for those struggling with illness and disease – especially for all those we hold in our hearts and minds.

Lord God, we thank you for showing us the way to new life and celebration, the way of Jesus Christ, the way of the cross.

Help us to remember his ways, just as we remember his words, when he taught us to pray together as we lift our eyes to heaven and our voices to God, singing:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**