

**“Loving Your Enemies”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
February 20, 2022

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

## **Readings**

### **Gospel of Matthew 5:43-45 (Chapter 5, Verses 43-45)**

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 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.

### **Selection from “TO A SIBERIAN WOODSMAN (after looking at some pictures in a magazine)” by Wendell Berry**

Who has invented our enmity? Who has prescribed us  
hatred of each other? Who has armed us against each other  
with the death of the world? Who has appointed me such anger  
that I should desire the burning of your house or the  
destruction of your children?

...

I sit in the shade of the trees of the land I was born in.

As they are native I am native, and I hold to this place as  
carefully as they hold to it.

I do not see the national flag flying from the staff of the sycamore,  
or any decree of the government written on the leaves of the walnut,  
nor has the elm bowed before any monuments or sworn the oath of allegiance.  
They have not declared to whom they stand in welcome.

## Sermon

The writer Wendell Berry continually returns to themes of community in his work and does so poignantly in his novel, *Jayber Crow*. Jayber is a barber who lives in the fictional town, Port William. He struggles to get along with Troy Chatham, a businessman, who Jayber believes is destroying the land with his large-scale agricultural practices. Troy has also married, Mattie, the woman Jayber has secretly loved for much of his life.

It is the late 1960s and the Vietnam War looms in the background touching the people of Port William with the political division the war has engendered. One evening in Jayber's barbershop Troy begins to let loose his dislike of war protestors.

“‘They ought to round up every one of them sons of bitches and put them right in front of the damned communists, and then whoever killed who, it would be all to the good.’

There was a little pause after that. Nobody wanted to try to top it...

It was hard to do, but I quit cutting hair and looked at Troy. I said, ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.’

Troy jerked his head up and widened his eyes at me. ‘Where did you get that crap?’

I said, ‘Jesus Christ.’

And Troy said, ‘Oh.’

It would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except that I did not love Troy.’”

Throughout the Gospel accounts of the teaching and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth, he is known for saying some confounding and challenging things to his disciples. “Love your enemies,” is at the top of the list. As this passage illustrates, these teachings may roll easily off the tongue, but, boy, are they hard to practice.

This particular teaching is part of Jesus' famous sermon on the mount, literally delivered atop a hill in northern Israel with a crowd of his followers and some curious onlookers gathered around.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’” Jesus preaches. “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Jesus had been teaching his disciples what he believed it really means to be children of God - what God's law truly commands of them.

To his followers — people who were outcasts and the underclass — the admonition to love their enemies, would have meant loving those who kept them poor, who mistreated them, who persecuted them simply for being of another social status.

Yet, Jesus says that the sun rises and the rains fall just the same on them both - those who believe they are in the right and those believed to be in the wrong.

For centuries, Christians and others who have found wisdom in Jesus' words have wrestled with this teaching, just as the listeners during Jesus' time surely did.

Our enemies come in many forms. These may be those who have done physical or emotional harm to us. These may be those whose ideas oppose our own and with whom we battle, not physically, but ideologically. These may be those who in our day to day lives seem to keep us from getting what we want.

Time and again, I have found myself running up against this simple and profoundly difficult teaching in confrontation with these outer enemies, the “Troy Chathams” of my own life.

I listen to a news story about families being evicted from their apartments, and I rage at the injustice.

“Love your enemies.”

I scroll my social media feed and read comments on a post by a local media outlet that strike me as rude and misinformed, and I fill with righteous anger.

“Love your enemies.”

My spouse does not take my well-meaning advice to separate out all the delicacies before running the washing machine, and I vibrate with annoyance.

“Love your enemies.”

Yes, the last example was a bit tongue in cheek, but I think it illustrates something else about our so-called enemies. Enemy is not a permanent status. It is instead a temporary designation - as temporary at times as a moment of intense annoyance. Who we deem to be an “enemy” can shift and change as we encounter those who don’t do what we want and as we move in and out of our own internal, emotional states.

The thing about having enemies is that what we are confronted with isn’t just external to us. It is actually the internal response we have to our perceived enemy out there that can loom large. Anger, animosity, rage, bitterness.

When these emotions become our predominant experience, they can take a hold of us in a way we know doesn’t serve our well-being and spiritual wholeness.

As Toni Morrison writes, “Hate does that. Burns off everything but itself, so whatever your grievance is, your face looks just like your enemy’s.”

Buddhist psychology calls these emotions the “inner enemy” because they, too, can harm us, and so these inner enemy emotions need tending.

The Sikh activist and writer, Valarie Kaur, talks about how we process rage in her book [See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love](#). She talks specifically of the rage felt by those who have suffered harm and trauma from oppressive social systems and in intimate relationships. She also points out that rage that is acted out is often a mask for other emotions that someone has not been allowed to safely express. It’s not that we ought to rid ourselves of these emotions, or repress them, because that can end up also playing out in harmful ways.

The solution, she says, is to have safe emotional spaces in which we process our rage and express the body's impulses without judgment or shame and without harming ourselves or others. Once we are able to do that, we can move in the direction of listening to the stories of even our opponents and working towards the social transformation required to reimagine a world in which systems of harm no longer exist.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often came back to the Gospel passage on loving your enemies in his preaching. In a sermon on the topic, he encouraged his listeners to love their enemies by looking for the good within those they call enemy. He encouraged them to recognize that all people have both good and evil within them. We, humans, have the capacity to do both good and to harm.

Knowing that this is true, we extend love to an enemy by recognizing the goodness inherent in them.

Again, this is easier said than done.

The Buddhist teachers, Sharon Salzberg and Robert Thurman, also speak to this recognition of good in one's enemy as a means of transforming ourselves. Salzberg shares the story of receiving this teaching when she was practicing with Buddhist monks in Burma. When she was instructed to think of something good about someone she didn't like, she resisted. Then, she thought of someone whose behaviors she often found offensive and remembered a time when they had done something generous for a mutual friend. She says as this memory of their goodness appeared, she resisted that as well. She didn't want to remember this because it made things more complicated. This person could no longer stay in the neat category of "enemy."

Together, Salzberg and Thurman teach and write about the inner work of attending to and processing the emotions that arise in the face of an enemy - anger, resentment, jealousy. This inner work involves changing our perceptions. The practice of recognizing the good in those we call enemy is one way of changing our perceptions. We can also extend curiosity towards those with whom we are in opposition and sit with our own difficult emotions when they arise. With this inner work, we face the "inner enemy" and can then return to love, compassion, and connection in our relationships.

Loving our enemies - outer and inner - is no easy task. Yet, we know that our own hearts long to be free and to be full of love, not hate.

Valarie Kaur writes, “The more I listen, the less I hate. The less I hate, the more I am free to choose actions that are controlled not by animosity but by wisdom. Laboring to love my opponents is how I love myself. This is not the stuff of saintliness. This is our birthright.”

Let us live into this birthright - to love ourselves, to love those for whom our love comes easily, and to love those who show us that loving is hard.

On January 15, a man stormed into Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas taking three congregants and the rabbi hostage for several hours before they were able to engineer an escape and FBI agents fatally wounded the hostage taker. In an interview just days following the attack, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker said: “...we can do a better job to remember that we’re all created in God’s image.”

Let us remember that we are all created in the image of the Divine.  
We are all holy and sacred.

May we know that, no matter who invents our enmity or prescribes our hatred of each other, our love can flow in ever widening circles.

May we take on this brave work.

So may it be.