

Understanding our faith
5

Enemy love

Reading

Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 10:25-37; Romans 12:14-21

Teaching

What does “love your enemy” mean?

Jesus taught that loving one’s enemy means actively seeking to do good to the kind of person one would tend to feel enmity towards. The clearest teaching here is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). That this is not a peripheral story is made clear by this parable being part of a conversation about the fundamental religious question (“what must I do to gain eternal life?”). Within that conversation, the parable answers the question “who is my neighbor?” (as in, the way to gain eternal life is to love God and neighbor).

A person who is clear about what love of enemy means probably has gained such clarity due to a fundamental faith commitment, not primarily due to rational argumentation.

Jesus basically equates “neighbor” and “enemy” (the beaten Jew’s “neighbor” is the Samaritan, his nation’s worst enemy). So, “love your enemy” must mean show compassion and kindness

toward *all* people, most especially those who in some sense are one’s enemy.

This may be difficult to do, and because of this difficulty, one easily resorts to “what if?” kinds of questions. But the basic meaning seems pretty clear.

In his actions, Jesus followed this same kind of path. We may think most centrally of his respectful and kind involvement with lots of the people who we may assume

could have been his enemies—law breakers, unclean people, Roman soldiers, Jewish religious leaders, those who put him on the cross.

It is clear from the responses Jesus himself received in his own lifetime, and from the responses pacifists have received ever since, that this whole issue of loving enemies is actually very much a question that can only ultimately be answered on the level of people’s faith.

Jesus could explain quite clearly what he meant by loving enemies, and embody it in his life, but still that would not be clear nor persuasive to people who do not share his faith. That is, people who do not see God in the same way Jesus saw God, people who do not understand the nature of reality in the same way Jesus understood the nature of reality would not agree with him on loving enemies.

A person who is clear about what love of enemy means probably has gained such clarity due to a fundamental worldview conviction (faith commitment), not primarily due to rational argumentation. A person who is not clear will likely not gain clarity without such a commitment.

Certainly, the phrase “love of enemy” can easily be used as a platitude. As well, our Christian faith community has probably at times used this “love of enemy” lingo while at the same time knowing little about genuine love and kindness toward certain people within this same community. That is why we need continually to reflect on the question of how we understand and apply the call to love enemies.