

HOMILY
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So, how do you treat your enemies? This is an ancient question and, to be honest, it is a question that is still relevant to our world today. Do you have any enemies? Most people do. We may not think of them as enemies, but let me ask you: Is there anyone who mistreats you at work, anyone at school, perhaps, someone in your own family? Is there anyone you feel who takes advantage of you? How do you feel about people of different political philosophies from your own?

There is a great political divide in our land today. It's not unusual for people on the left and people on the right to regard each other with disdain. During the Watergate Scandal, do you remember that President Nixon had an "Enemies List"? People in Washington who found that they were on that list were highly complimented. It was an honor to know that the President hated you. Do you have an enemies list? How do you treat the people on that list?

There is an old Irish blessing that goes like this:

*May God bless those who love us,
And those that don't love us,
May God turn their hearts.
And if he doesn't turn their hearts,
May he turn their ankles,
So we may know them by their limping.*

Do you have any enemies and, if so, how do you treat them? And does your faith affect how you treat those who have done you wrong? In the passage today from Luke, Jesus laid a heavy burden on his followers when he said:

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well.... Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

This teaching puts us all under judgment, doesn't it? Who among us is able to live out this teaching? Somebody pulls out on you on the expressway. What's your first reaction: "Yes, brother, Jesus loves you and so do I." Someone at work gets credit for an idea that was yours: "Yes, sister, I'm glad you're getting the credit. There's more than enough to go around." You find out somebody's been saying bad things about you behind your back: "That's perfectly all right, friend. You can still put me down as a reference on your resume."

It's easy to love your enemies, isn't it—to do good to them, to lend to them without expecting anything back! Sure, and if you believe that, I've got some oceanfront property in Arizona that I can get you a real deal on!

It's a good thing that God loves us even when we are so imperfect, because the entire world would fail this test. The desire to lash out, to find some way of getting even on people who have wronged us, can sometimes be overwhelming.

There was a news report from Japan about a man named Susumu Suzuki, age 45, who was arrested and charged with having made approximately 8,500 phone calls to city hall—as many as several hundred a day—and then hanging up without speaking. He cites as his motive a 20-year snub by city hall when he applied for a job after graduating from college.

I know that that is a little extreme, but it does illustrate how easily we can become swept up in the need to return evil for evil. It is not easy to love our enemies, whether on a personal level or a corporate one.

In light of continuing threats to our security, many Americans are having difficulty with our feelings toward followers of Islam. Even though a relatively tiny number of adherents of this ancient religion are involved in acts of terror, our fear might cause us to generalize our hatred to the entire population. And that would be wrong.

It is true that the fundamentalist followers of Mohammad are sometimes very difficult to love. You may remember when writer Salman Rushdie first gained the public eye because he had a bounty on his head. Why? For writing words critical

of The Prophet, even though he is a Moslem himself. It was a harsh reminder that you can be killed in some parts of the world just for asking questions or expressing doubts. Of course, there was a time when that was true in the Christian world, too, but we conveniently forget that. It is very difficult for us to relate to such a religion. And, yet, relate to it we must. For if we do not, if we hate people simply because of their religion, do we not become exactly like the people who hate us so much. If we return evil for evil, what separates you and me from sinners, asks Jesus?

The teaching that challenges each of us today is simply this: It is impossible to have the spirit of Christ within us and at the same time to have a spirit of hatred for any other human being. And yet it is so hard not to have ill feelings toward those who have wronged us. Truthfully, every one of us will fail at this test some time or another. In fact, that's the point Our Lord is making in our lesson for today.

*“Love your enemies, do good to them...then your reward
will be great and you will be children of the Most High,
for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.
Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.”*

We can show kindness to others because God has shown kindness to us with all our wrongdoing. We love because we have been loved, not because we deserve that love but because of God. God is love and the spirit of love possesses those who have God within them.

That is our only hope. That is the world's only hope—that the spirit of Christ will one day dwell in every heart. Then there will be no more wars, no terrorism, and no hatred. That is our hope, our only hope as followers of Jesus.

Do you see any other hope? We keep killing terrorists and more terrorists step in the line behind them. “Mole-whacking” is what some of our soldiers call it. You whack one mole in your yard and another sticks up its head in another part of the yard. Violence may keep the enemy at bay, but it will not solve the problem. Only the love of Christ can do that.

TV news reporter Peter Arnett was visiting the West Bank in Israel when a bomb exploded in the middle of town. He was surrounded by anguished screams and clouds of smoke. A man holding an injured girl ran up to Peter and asked for a ride to a hospital. As they sped through the streets, the man nursed the bloody girl in the backseat. The doctors did everything to save the girl's life, but to no avail.

Peter turned to comfort the man on the loss of his child, but the man interrupted him. She wasn't his child, he said. She was a Palestinian. He was Israeli. He found her lying in the street and decided to help.

"Mister," he said through his tears, "there must come a time when we realize that we are all one family."

So I ask you, do you know of any other hope? I don't. So, how do you treat your enemies? Jesus said to simply love them. Think what might happen, my friends, to our world if our religion affected how we regard those who would do us wrong. I believe in my heart—I *know* in my heart—the whole world would be changed.