





LOVE

YOUR

FRENEMIES

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JESUS BUILT HIS

CHURCH FROM

A GROUP OF

POLITICAL ENEMIES.

WHY DID I LOVE

TO STING MINE?



ON A TYPICAL THANKSGIVING

I would have been in the house with my family, putting the final touches on the meal. We might even have talked about religion and politics as we worked, but not in a bad dinner conversation kind of way. For the better part of a decade, we had all read the same theologians, admired the same pundits, and echoed each other's opinions on social issues.

On the Thanksgiving two weeks after the 2016 election, however, I stood alone on my deck and wept. Five years earlier, God had begun using a series of major life events to resurrect long-buried aspects of my story. In the process, I had come to see the world very differently than my family did—and come to see certain family members as something like wrong-headed adversaries.

Now, where I saw catastrophe, all they could see was me “overreacting.” I felt alienated and disoriented.

As I struggled to make sense of my predicament, Jesus' cryptic warning to his disciples came to mind: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matt. 10:34–36).

Initially it seems ironic that Jesus, whom we hail as the Prince of Peace, announces that he will disturb the peace. But I've learned that what he disturbs is an artificial peace, one achieved through conformity and uniformity—foundational characteristics of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–4). Since it depends on establishing and maintaining sameness, this peace can't offer a violent and divided world healing or reconciliation, not even when it's embraced by people who happen to identify as Christ followers.

DIVINE DISRUPTION

Before God disrupted the uniformity of my household, I had been comfortable identifying as a "model minority" who fit in with white, upper-middle-class, politically conservative evangelicals. I had willingly subordinated my God-given ethnic identity for this adopted identity. I was satisfied with a sense of self divorced from my Taiwanese heritage, satisfied with being a second-generation American who had achieved the American Dream. I had associated the traumatic experiences of my childhood with my parents' culture and had responded by creating as much distance as I could between my identity and theirs.

In 2014, a period of medical and mental health crises resulted in a two-year journey that closed that distance, helping me uncover the historical roots of my family's brokenness. I learned that generations of my family had endured oppression and trauma, including Japanese imperialism, ethnic segregation, US air raids, radical regime change, land and asset theft by people in power, mass murder, a lengthy period of violent political repression known as the White Terror, and decades of martial law. In previous generations, my own ancestors had themselves been colonizers, part of a mass migration of Han Chinese fleeing poverty who settled on Taiwan, the island that Austronesian aboriginal tribes had inhabited for several millennia. Their arrival resulted in large-scale loss of cultural identity for many aboriginal tribes.

These revelations caused me to read the Scriptures anew. For the first time, I saw my parents, grandparents, and even the Taiwanese aborigines reflected in the masses of first-century, peasant-class Jews struggling to survive under both oppressive Roman imperialism and the corrupt practices of their wealthier, more powerful Jewish counterparts. I read Jesus' teachings from the perspective of downtrodden people who long for deliverance and justice, rather than from the perspective of a comfortable American pursuing personal spiritual development.

This shift in perspective pulled me toward the helpless and harassed in my own city: people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness, immigrants in anxious mixed-status families, traumatized refugees, entire neighborhoods still suffering the lingering economic effects of Jim Crow and white

flight. As I connected with these people, I came to believe they were those whose treatment Jesus used as a litmus test for determining who his true followers were (Matt. 25:31–46).

My relationships with these neighbors brought an entirely different level of spiritual accountability into my life. I realized the ways I had hoarded wealth or indulged in hedonism, ways all too common for Christians in my own socioeconomic class. My new friends' faith in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles rebuked my habit of complaining about trivial things. I felt convicted about my racial prejudice (John 4:9), classism (James 2:3, 4), and sectarianism (1 Cor. 3:3–9). It seemed nothing in my life came out clean.

NEW POLITICS, OLD DILEMMA

Suddenly, the politics I had espoused for several decades didn't address my marginalized friends' urgent concerns. These were people with legitimate grievances against dominant groups insensitive to their plight. But my former political framework often placed them squarely in the category of a troublesome, inferior people who deserved scorn, suppression, or expulsion. Now that I knew and loved them, I realized they weren't primarily interested in causing trouble; they longed for deliverance and justice—much like my own family once did.

It was impossible not to empathize as I listened to their stories. Their deprivations became personal concerns; their enemies became my enemies. I crusaded on social media and at the dinner table, cheered on by a new network of people who felt the same.

Soon, my passionate about-face incited friction with family members and longtime friends. Some sent scathing messages. Others withdrew from my life. There were moments when it felt like even my husband and mother-in-law had become my

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enemies—the kind whose fundamentally different sympathies and allegiances created an unbridgeable chasm, despite our shared faith in Christ. I had become good at denouncing things. But this habitual disparaging wore on people who couldn't easily unfriend, unfollow, avoid, or abandon me.

I didn't want to admit that I'd had fallen under the spell of self-righteousness. Much had changed inside me, and yet I still considered certain people deserving of scorn, suppression, or expulsion; they were just different people.

JESUS' THIRD WAY: ENEMY LOVE

Many things about the Christian faith are a mystery, but not how we're supposed to treat our enemies:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. . . . If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:43-48)

But why would we love people who seemingly work hard to earn our hatred? Hatred can feel like a weapon of righteousness defending people being crushed or a tool that helps the dispossessed hold onto a sense of dignity. It's not difficult to understand why people in Jesus' day parsed the word *neighbor* in Leviticus 19:18 to justify nurturing contempt toward or doing violence to their oppressors (Matt. 5:43).

The unavoidable truth, though, is that the cost of not loving our enemies is far greater. As I've observed the effects of mounting tribalism in my life and in the world, I've recognized that Jesus was imparting an ancient wisdom—one that applies both to playground disputes and high-stakes conflicts.

Recently, as I helped my eight-year-old daughter process pain and anger over recurring conflict with a friend of hers, she kept proposing snarky comebacks and asking me, "That would be a good burn, wouldn't it?" The impulse to retaliate is present in us from childhood. I've never seen it lead to relational restoration.

French philosopher René Girard wrote about a great paradox that occurs in human conflict. In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, a study of violence in human societies, he identified a pattern: As antagonism between rivals becomes embittered, people on opposing sides begin to look more alike than different. Take ethnic conflict. Non-dominant groups are often beset with a sense of perpetual frustration, disempowerment, and fear, breeding anger and resentment. When that resentment hardens, it's common to hear a battle cry that sounds like, "For the sake of our lives, we have to bring down these racist/fascist/elitist pigs and expel them from our midst!" In reaction, dominant groups who hold power will rally around the sentiment, "For the sake of preserving peace and civil order, we have to crush these despicable rabble-rousers/race baiters/anarchists!"

Loving our enemies, then, is the only way to avoid taking on the very characteristics we hate about them. Jesus instructs us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors precisely because loving and respecting only those who love

and respect us leaves a violent and chaotic world unchanged. Preferential love can motivate one tribe to defeat its enemies and bring about a rearrangement of who's in power, but it cannot interrupt cycles of violence, exclusion, and oppression. Martin Luther King Jr. understood this when he wrote in *Strength to Love*:

Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says "Love your enemies," he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition. Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

BUT HOW?

My family attended church like normal the Sunday following the presidential election, but the service felt anything but. Beloved church members who had voted for Donald Trump were worshiping God in the same room as other beloved church members threatened by Trump's victory, including Dreamers and American-citizen children of undocumented immigrants. Within those walls, happiness and relief mingled with dread and grief. Despite the cordiality and even affection between these groups, it was apparent that the vastly different political interests and allegiances represented in that room pitted people against one another. It was a tangible representation of something Eugene Peterson wrote in *Reversed Thunder*, his commentary on Revelation:

There is no avoiding politics. The moment one life impinges upon another, politics begins. And our lives do impinge on others whether we will it or not. . . . No action or belief is private. The more religious or value-charged, the less private. Matters associated with Christ and Antichrist are, then, the least private and therefore the most political of all. Everything we think gets out of our skulls and everything we do goes beyond our skins, entering into a crisscrossing network of complex interaction.

My pastor acknowledged the situation that Sunday with these words: "Church is a community of enemies learning to love one another." While studying the gospels, I unexpectedly found Jesus showing how this works, through his selection of his 12 disciples.

Normally, when people form church planting teams, they select those who are 100 percent onboard with the specific mission of the future congregation. Not Jesus. He called members of enemy groups to form his most intimate group of followers. Four of the disciples belonged to or heavily sympathized with the Zealots, a political movement whose all-consuming passion for liberation from Roman rule led them to commit murder and acts of terrorism against Roman authorities and fellow Jews friendly with Rome. They had a particular

hatred for tax collectors, Jews who served the pagan empire and often acquired wealth by extorting money from their own people. So Jesus flabbergasted them all when he chose a tax collector to join their ranks (Luke 5:27–32).

Politics wasn't the only divide. Six of the disciples were poor fishermen living at a subsistence level, subjected to exploitative taxes and tolls. It was not uncommon for people of their class to be reduced to beggars and outlaws by members of the Jewish nobility who knew how to work the legal and economic systems to secure their own wealth. And yet Jesus's 12th choice was Bartholomew/Nathanael, a man of noble birth.

To say these men were sharply divided is an understatement. Some had suffered from the actions of the groups that others represented. And at least four would not have been philosophically opposed to expressing their disapproval through violence toward Matthew or Bartholomew. Perhaps that's why Jesus began his public ministry with acts of mercy that eased suffering—healing diseases, casting out demons, and alleviating chronic pain (Matt. 4:23–25)—and then followed up immediately with a message that not only recognized the people's experience of disenfranchisement, grief, and conflict but also promised inheritance, peace, and belonging (Matt. 5:3–12).

Consider the enormity of Jesus' disciple selection. He welcomed militant nationalists from an oppressed class and someone who would have been considered a race traitor. He welcomed people born into wealth and people living hand-to-mouth. By calling them into the same inner circle, he created a community that would demand something from everyone, something that would represent a cross for each person to bear. As the disciples faced each other day after day, those from privileged classes were challenged to repent of their indifference toward the oppressed; greedy opportunists were challenged to repent of their self-serving greed and make reparation to people they had defrauded; embittered victims were challenged to forgive and humanize their oppressors; and people who lived by the sword were required to lay down both their violent rhetoric and their weapons.

These were not merely ideological requirements. They were *relational* requirements that enabled the disciples to continue to follow Jesus together, the only ways they could have fulfilled the law of love (John 13:34, 35). Yes, they continued to have disputes over which of them was the greatest and presumably also which of them was the worst, but had each of them not been willing to change at a fundamental level, they would have missed out on being with Jesus. The same is true for us.

IMAGINATION'S ROLE IN LOVING OUR ENEMIES

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster describes prayer as the primary process through which we're enabled to see people and situations from God's point of view. A scripturally informed imagination can help. One tool that has guided my

prayers in this area is imagining myself at a table preparing to receive bread and wine from Jesus, before his journey to the cross, with the following people: 1) the American-citizen kids from my church whose breadwinner dad was deported due to Trump's policies; 2) brothers and sisters who voted for and support Trump; 3) anti-racism activists; 4) people who shrug off racism; 5) white supremacists; 6) police officers; 7) people traumatized by police brutality; 8) people who rejected me for my ideas; and 9) others as needed.

I still ache over the anguish of some and the bigotry of others, but this prayer discipline has chipped away at the parts of me tempted to reduce, write off, or wage war on some of those at the table. It has helped me surrender my personal agenda to Christ's agenda—quite distinct from promoting my own agenda in the name of Christ. Prayer has helped me become better at discerning when to speak and when to be silent, what

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I should say and how I should say it. It has enabled me to break free of the tribal patterns of the world.

The way of the cross invites us to die. It is also the entry point into a living kingdom this world does not know but desperately needs. It's not merely an ethic, either; it's a power, and it's available only because Jesus made the humiliating, torturous journey to the cross, took our judgment upon himself, died, and then was resurrected. In her book *The Crucifixion*, Fleming Rutledge writes that God has actual "power to make right all that has been wrong throughout the entire sorry history of 'Adam,'" and that his rectifying power "is a recapturing of the entire history of the created order and a remaking of it." Precisely "because he has rewritten the story, we are no longer prisoners of our worst selves, nor of the evil powers that would destroy us." And by his wounds, there is now power to heal our divisions (Isa. 53:5).

CT

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