

## Loving our enemies

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### Read: Luke 6:27-38

*Jesus, your teaching is hard. Give us grace to hear your challenge, and by your faithfulness to us warm our hearts that we may be sharers of your mercy. Amen.*

I feel like a topic like this, and strong words from Jesus about loving enemies and turning the other cheek when we are struck on one, deserves a trigger warning. Because this is seriously hard stuff, and for anyone who has experienced abuse this has to be approached with caution. The caution is that allowing abuse to continue is not helpful for either victim or perpetrator; cycles of abuse have to be stopped, usually by stepping away from them. Doing good to those who abuse doesn't consist of allowing them to continue to abuse – that's not doing good for them, or for anyone.

Jesus teaching that we should love our enemies is stretching the question of “who is my neighbour”, whom I should love. In Leviticus, the idea of “loving your neighbour as yourself” was probably originally aimed at your literal, fellow-Jewish neighbour. But Jesus stretches the definition beyond the “people like me” next door through to people of other cultures – hence the Good Samaritan story. Here he stretches it even further to loving enemies, which is pretty much a paradox if ‘enemies’ are the people we hate. Whether you think you have enemies or not, there's a challenge in here.

In the book “The Cure for Hate”, a former white supremacist describes his journey into extremism and back out of it again, eventually. While I haven't read the book through yet – I've just started it - I think I can say a few things.

What drove the author into the white supremacist movement was the experience of being hurt himself, and finding acceptance and belonging with a gang who were motivated to project power and fear and solidarity with each other, over against perceived or projected threats. All extremist groups, whether left or right, religious or secular, have common traits of being over against others, and possibly come from common experiences of exclusion, hurt or humiliation. What eventually helped this author out of the cycle was unconditional love, in this case from his mother, and the hope for something better for his own kids.

Extremists of all kinds have a strong “us” verses “them” mentality, which help to hold them together and which, of course, happily makes enemies of others. “Others” become threats.

But even if extremists try to make enemies out of us, we can refuse to be enemies. Part of avoiding the path of reaction and retaliation is the recognition that the one who provokes

you is, despite their actions, a human being created by God. It is worth trying to understand them with compassion, even if they take actions which need to be condemned.

In the occupied territories in Palestine, there are Palestinian Christians in the “Tent of Nations” who have been in decades long battles to retain the land which had been in their families for generations. Even as they engage in court battles, they are planting hundreds of olive trees as signs of hope for the future. They live and share alongside of Muslim friends, and refuse to call the occupying forces their enemies. For them as Christians, this call of Jesus is very meaningful and real. They refuse to call those who persecute them their enemies, because they recognise that all people are created in the image of God. That said, they will not give up their land claim. And they ask others (to quote their website) “to not be on one side only, but to be on the side of peace and justice, which is for everyone.”

Jesus stands for justice and compassion, but he is neither reactionary nor violent.

His self-control, in that respect - his ability to respond rather than react - comes from a secure understanding of himself as loved by God – as we are. That’s why Jesus’ ‘Sermon on the Plain’ started with his assurance: blessed are you who are poor, you who weep, you who are hungry, and you excluded and persecuted on account of this faith. You are blessed, you are loved by God; the kingdom of heaven is yours.

When you know that you are loved, and that the kingdom of heaven is yours out of God’s mercy, you have a stronger foundation from which to respond to provocation with grace. You have a stronger foundation from which to listen to the other and recognise their wounded humanity.

Knowing that we are seen by God, loved by God, and invited to share God’s kingdom is the basis of the Holy Spirit bringing transformation to us, so that the impulse to retaliation which is human nature can be soothed, to allow us to respond rather than react, and to meet hate with understanding and the desire for good.

We need this for the good of society, and as disciples who are practicing our relationship with God in prayer, reflection, worship and action, this is Jesus’ call to us.