

Loving the Enemy Within

Psalm 13 *How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

Romans 6:12-23 *For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*

Matthew 5:44 *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*

Don Morrison gave me the idea for the sermon today. He works creatively with the lectionary each week preparing the daily worship at the Festival Center. This past week, in response to Psalm 13, he directed us to reflect on the “enemy within.” This is a fruitful way to approach psalms that talk about our enemies and even ask God to wipe them out. The image of God wiping out other people to save our own skins should be bothersome to us. Jesus’ core teachings, which are widely ignored by Christians themselves these days, have to do with non-violent love toward all people, including our enemies: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” [Matt. 5:44]

The Enemies Within

There are persons who live in destructive and threatening ways, whose own spirits are so disoriented or damaged that they inflict suffering on others. Scripture does not pretend they don’t exist or take it lightly. Instead of taking matters into our own hands, however, we are counseled to take refuge in God and God’s steadfast love. Jesus leads us further in the positive direction of loving our enemies. Loving our enemies, inside or outside us, is hard. But Christ calls us to it and apparently believes that we can do it.

I think that when Jesus taught that we are to love our enemies, he knew that we have to begin with the stuff that is inside us. If we can deal with those things in ourselves that make us defensive, hostile, and unhappy, then we will find other people less threatening. The change has happened in us, not them. As we deepen our compassion and understanding toward our own internal enemies, our compassion and understanding unfolds toward others.

We can learn to love our “outside” enemies by learning to love our “inside” enemies. What are our internal enemies? Anger. Hurt. Jealousy. Long-held grudges. Various kinds of insecurity and fear. Feelings of inadequacy, never measuring up. Each of us needs to identify our own internal enemies, those attitudes, feelings, habits of thinking that keep us from living fully the life God made us to live and the life Christ calls us to.

I was having lunch with a friend years ago. I asked him, “Are there things about yourself that you so badly want to change, that just keep coming back again and again and cause you pain?” It was more a confession of my own feelings about myself than a real question. My friend surprised me as he

teared up and said, “Oh yes. It makes me want to cry.” There are things that just seem to dog us, rearing their ugly heads again and again. We think we’ve outgrown, outrun, or fixed them once and for all. Then something happens and the whole thing flares up again. Our inner life is once again a mess, and we can identify with the psalmist’s words about feeling under siege and very distant from God:

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

When an internal enemy appears, our first response is to attack. We don’t want it there. We want to drive it out, to kill it. This is the opposite of Jesus’ teaching. We need to learn how to love this internal enemy, to transform it from enemy to friend. Here is where what we call our inward journey is so crucial. If we are giving significant time each day to quieting ourselves, being more aware of what is going on in us, and opening our spirits to God’s help, then we are able to work with these internal enemies in a non-violent way. Transformation is possible.

The Light of Awareness and Understanding

We need to stop turning our inner life into a battlefield. This only makes things worse. These difficult things within us come from somewhere in our experience, in our life. They are part of us, not invaders from outer space! So we have to stop dividing ourselves into good and bad and waging war against ourselves.

The psalm says, “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.” I suggest that we can read this as calling upon the light of awareness and understanding with regard to our inner life. When we pray to God to give “light to our eyes,” we are allowing ourselves to become aware of what is going on in us. So often we are not aware. Those feelings and responses churn around inside us prompting ways of living that are not healthy for ourselves or loving toward others. I think that lack of awareness and understanding of our inner life can be seen as the “sleep of death” the psalmist talks about. It is being controlled by feelings and habits of thinking and responding that we do not recognize or understand. In this sense, the “enemy has prevailed over us,” as the psalm says. We are spiritually dead.

So our first step is to become aware. Just awareness, not judgment. So we practice stopping and calming ourselves. Instead of sounding the alarm and getting ourselves ready for a battle, we welcome this “enemy” as we would an old friend, granted a bothersome old friend! This is an important beginning. Thich Nhat Hanh says that we should give this kind of greeting: “Hello, anger, my old friend! I know you are there. How are you?” We welcome the feeling that has arisen instead of turning it into an enemy. We recognize that this “enemy” is a part of us, yet also that we are more than this feeling or memory

or habit of thinking that causes us pain. When we begin to embrace our internal enemies in this way, we are already draining them of much of their power over us. The situation is already improved and hopeful!

Try this some time. When your old internal enemy comes knocking at the door, instead of reaching for your gun, open the door, smile, and say: Hello, old fear (hurt, anger, anxiety... whatever). I know you. Come in and let's visit. We do this in the context of prayer, of quieting ourselves in God's presence. What we are doing is really practicing grace, God's unconditional and steadfast love for us. God has not turned us into enemies because we behave badly. Jesus Christ is God's love for us embodied in a human being like us, living with us and for us. Paul says in the passage from Romans for today that sin—the life that runs counter to our true nature as God's beloved children—no longer has dominion over us because of God's love in Christ. We are no longer under the control of sin but are freed from the law by grace and for grace. So when we spend time each day in quietness and in reflection on what is going on in us, becoming more aware and without judgment, we are putting into practice God's unconditional love for us. We are loving ourselves as God loves us.

Now we can move toward understanding. Where does this fear come from? Why did that person arouse such anger or jealousy in me? Why do I keep telling myself that I am not good enough, that I never measure up? When we simply accept the "enemies" within us, welcoming them and treating them as old friends, then we are calm and peaceful enough to begin looking more deeply. Here is where journal writing can be so helpful. In our journals we describe these "enemies" and record our insights into them and how they affect us. Over time we can keep track of how we are doing with these things, gaining further insight and understanding as we go along.

Another important help in all of this is having a safe place where we can share these things with others. That is why our church has always emphasized the importance of mission groups. A mission group is two or more people committed to a particular mission to which they feel called by God. The mission itself is reason for the group's existence. However, the spiritual dimension of the group's life is crucial. A deepening sense of belonging to each other and a stronger caring about one another are essential. For this reason, members share regularly with the group a report on their spiritual lives, how they are doing, where they are struggling, where they are growing, what God is doing in their lives.

If one is not in a mission group, it is important to find some way of sharing at this depth with another person. Choosing someone to be a spiritual companion or friend—the older word is "spiritual director"—is an important step. It needs to be someone you trust as a good listener who does not judge but can offer honest and helpful insight. All of this is what we call "accountability," having someone or a group with whom we can share honestly where we are on our spiritual journey, how we are doing with our "enemies within."

Experiencing Salvation (Wholeness)

Our spiritual journey, the inward journey we talk about here, is a journey that takes place beneath the sunlight of God's grace. We have to shine that light on our own lives. So we practice looking with compassion on our internal enemies. And if we work with having compassion toward ourselves, we find a deeper and more real self-acceptance and peace. And if that is happening, we will have the same compassion, understanding, and peace toward others, even those who cause us such a problem.

All of this is about changing ourselves, not others. It is about our own transformation, or conversion, not that of other people we experience as enemies. Those psalms that plead with God to deal harshly with the psalmist's enemies never say whether or not God actually does what the psalmist asks! The psalmist feels free to express real human emotions of anger and fear and a desire to get back. Yet the psalmist always moves on to contemplate his own faithfulness, his own life. He remembers that he has trusted in God's steadfast love before and calls himself back to that same trust. Trusting in God's care of us is not something we achieve once and for all. We have to come back to it in every new situation. When the threat comes again, when the old enemy or a new one appears, we must again take refuge in God's steadfast love, becoming aware again of what is going on, and working with ourselves in awareness and compassion.

In this way, we experience in a concrete and real way what it means to "rejoice in God's salvation." Salvation means healing, wholeness. Practicing God's grace in ourselves, we enter the sanctuary of God's steadfast love for us. We no longer divide ourselves up into good and bad, but embrace the whole of who we are the way God's love embraces us, completely and unconditionally. If we are treating ourselves in this way, we will know how to begin loving the outward enemies. They, too, are part of us in God's love, whether they are acting like it or not. Secure in God's love for us, we lose some of our defensiveness and anger toward others. We become more aware that they are not separate from us. We can begin to love them through understanding and compassion. We can begin to love our neighbor—even our most troublesome one—as we love ourselves.