

What good are enemies? script and counter script

- [Genesis 45:3-11, 15](#)
- [1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50](#)
- [Luke 6:27-38](#)
- [Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42](#)
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Introduction

When I first started reading and thinking about the lectionary texts for today,

I thought this sermon might be the easiest one I've ever done, and maybe the shortest.

What we have is Luke's version of the last antithesis in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

There Jesus says, as we have read many times,

“You have heard it said, ‘love your neighbors and hate your enemies,’

But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for the ones who persecute you.”

Our theme for this year, script and counter script, is directly based on these scriptures.

So, script: Hate your enemies.

And, counter script: Love your enemies.

That pretty much sums it up—and then I could throw in that pragmatic bit

about the only real way to destroy your enemy is to make your enemy your friend.

What more, really, needs to be said? I could stop right here; and we could all go home.

But..... ☺

Unfortunately for any of you who are ready to go home, it wasn't Jesus who said that bit

about making enemies into friends—it was Abraham Lincoln,

and what the Bible has to say about enemies, is well worth

the time and energy we'll put into it this morning.

The lectionary texts

This lectionary does us a wonderful service, this morning,

juxtaposing a curious set of biblical texts.

Together they pose a provocative set

of questions for us on the subject of enemies.

In Genesis 45, we are coming toward the end of the long narrative about Joseph.

The Egyptians, as well as Joseph's family back home,

are two years into the seven year famine that Joseph predicted,

and for which he prepared the Egyptians

by storing food from the preceding seven fat years.

By the time we get to the part of the story that we are looking at,

Joseph's brothers have already made one trip to buy food.

Joseph recognized them but they didn't recognize him.

Trading on their ignorance of his identity,

Joseph carries out a rather elaborate ruse

to get his brothers to bring Benjamin the next time,

the young brother they had left behind

as consolation for their elderly father.

Back home, this news about needing to bring Benjamin next time,
caused no small consternation for Jacob, who had already lost Joseph, as far as he knew.
The family put off the second trip to buy food as long as they possibly could.

When they reached the point of desperation,
the brothers, with Benjamin, ventured back to Egypt.
Again, things didn't go so well for the brothers.

There was another elaborate ruse on Joseph's part that resulted
in a false accusation of theft for, of course, Benjamin,
the apple of his father's eye, and, evidently,
a favorite of his older brothers.

Framing Benjamin for robbery seems to have had one purpose
in Joseph's mind—getting his brothers to come clean about what they had done to him.
But when one of the brothers, Judah, begs to take Benjamin's place as Joseph's slave,
the penalty for the robbery, not even Joseph can hold onto his purpose.
His revenge, if that is what it was, is complete.

His brothers now know what it is to be sold into slavery.

But he cannot follow that script into the sweetness of revenge.

He, Joseph, the mighty Egyptian overlord,
breaks down in tears and identifies himself to his brothers.
They, naturally, are afraid, and appropriately wary,
given what Joseph has put them through.

But Joseph, following his new script now,
assures them of his forgiveness,
and even urges them to forgive themselves,
because God has brought about goodness and salvation
from their destructive behavior.

There is certainly enough enmity in the Joseph story to go around,
enmity within families and enmity within the self.

There is the particularly bitter enmity that can sometimes happen within families,
the very structure that is designed
to provide love and nurture to every human creature.

This enmity begins with Jacob's favoring Joseph over his older brothers;
it grows with the brothers' attack on Joseph—and the discord among the brothers
that allows Joseph to survive as slave.

The enmity festers over the years; and culminates
in Joseph's distrust and his brothers' fear
—hence the elaborate and not terribly transparent back and forth
that accompanies the reconciliation.

But the hatred dissolves in Joseph's tears.
Love overcomes bitterness in Joseph's life;
and love overcomes fear in the lives of Joseph's brothers.

And, finally, love overcomes even the brothers' self-blame and guilt.
It is not that their repentance is unimportant,
rather Joseph is wise enough to see
that guilt harbored too long can become its own enmity,
an enmity within the self itself.

This love is not without cost, for anyone in the story.
It is not cheap love—it is a love that emerges in Joseph’s heart after a very long time,
it is a love that takes years to mature.

It is a love that not only costs Joseph,
but also costs Rueben, who offers his own young sons as collateral,
and Judah, who offers his own freedom for that of Benjamin’s.

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But the familial enmity that is decades in its virulent persistence,
is, in the end, no match for the overwhelming love that disperses it.

After years of wounding and deceit;
after testing and tribulation,
in the end love is the final word.

Psalm 37, which we used for our confession this morning,
provides another biblical perspective on enemies.

The enemies that are identified in this psalm are
those who use the might of the sword and the bow,
against the poor and against those who walk uprightly, and who do justice.

In this passage, interestingly, we are not told to love our enemies.

We are told, rather, to disregard them; to pay them no mind.

Rather than fretting about what these evil people are doing, we are to ignore them.

We are to assure ourselves that God is not on the side of the wicked.

Instead, the Psalmist tells us, God finds these evil ones ridiculous,
and knows exactly how shallow and short-lived is their domination.

Wait, counsels the Psalmist, and you will learn that God loves justice.

The purpose and lives of the enemies are going to be shattered,
because God loves the poor and oppressed who call upon God’s name.

There is an interesting turn toward the end of that Psalm,
where the Psalmist counsels the hearers to turn from evil and do good.

The Psalm as a whole assumes that the hearers are on the side of God
and opposed to the doers of evil, those who oppress the poor;

In other words, the enemies of God are the enemies of the people of God.

But there toward the end, it gets a little messier.

In verse 27, after extolling the virtues of the upright,
the Psalmist reminds the listeners that if they are not on the side of God,
they need to turn from doing evil to doing good.

Evil doers can be found among God’s people.

But the good news is that even evil doers,
whether among God’s people, or outside the people of God,
get a second chance—they can turn from their evil ways and do justice.

In something of a roundabout way, love is the solution for enmity here too.

Turning from evil involves seeing the poor and oppressed as those favored by God.

Turning from evil involves seeing the poor and oppressed as those loved by God.

Turning from evil involves loving the poor and oppressed as God loves them.

But here the injunction to love is placed on the enemies themselves;
Love is the way out of enmity with God.

Page | 4 If the Genesis story works with enmity within oneself and the family,
and the Psalm works with enmity on a community or political level,
Luke 6 works with enmity across the board in an overarching way.

It is a mega-text; a text that pulls themes from elsewhere in the biblical canon together.
As such, it merits extra attention.

Jesus, as Luke portrays him, works with the notion of love for enemies
both personally and systemically.

The examples he gives are up close and personal to be sure:
Striking your cheek; someone violating your very person.
Taking your personal possessions; someone depriving you of basic human needs.
Giving to the beggar or the robber without expecting to get anything back;
letting go of any notion of fairness.

While none of these examples are literal in the sense that Jesus expected his disciples
to do these exact things in these exact ways,
all of them are quite personal.

Clearly, Jesus means for us to put love into practice in ways
that affect our everyday behavior in our everyday lives.
Clearly, Jesus means for love as resistance against enemies to be fully embodied.
But just as clearly, and more systemically, Jesus envisioned this kind of love,
as a love that fully and frankly confronts enemies.
In that sense, each act of this new script, small and insignificant as it may seem,
is an act of resistance against the enemy;
it chisels away at the status quo of suppression;
it gnaws at the foundation of the domination.

This love is real and, because it is real, it is a force to be reckoned with.
This love is not submission.
Feminist and womanist thinkers have rightly called us to account in this regard;
Love for enemies is neither especially nice nor is it weak.

I am following Walter Wink here, of course, who reminds us that each of the examples
Jesus offers in his teaching about love of enemies,
is a shaming act, an indirect act of resistance in a culture
in which everyone would pretty much know exactly what was going on.

Yes, we are to love our enemies.

Loving our enemies means loving them at their moral core.

Yes, we are to love our enemies.

Loving our enemies means seeing them as fully human and loved by God.

Yes, we are to love our enemies.

Loving our enemies means confronting and shaming them.

Instead of hating enemies; we see them as redeemable disciples of Jesus.

Instead of hating enemies; we call them to act as God's beloved.

Instead of hating enemies; we stand up to them because God loves them.

Script and counter script; all three of these texts are resources for us
as we consider our theme for the year.

I suggest that there are scripts and counter scripts in *each* of these three texts:

In the Joseph story, there are a couple of scripts that Joseph decides not to follow.

One is the script of revenge that we've already looked at.

But another script that Joseph did not choose
was just to overlook the wrong doing.

For the sake of his longing to see his father, maybe he could just overlook,
what the brothers had done.

Especially in the two year interval between the first and second visit,
Joseph must have longed to just let bygones be bygones.

But Joseph chose to pursue the counter script of reconciliation;

His shaming his brothers was a way of holding them to account.

It was a way of making them look at themselves and their past actions.

It was also, by the grace of God, a revelation of how much they had grown up
and become better people during the time Joseph spent in Egypt.

As Joseph told them, he saw the hand of God at work in all that had happened,
both the evil and the good.

In the end, it was God who protected Joseph and also his brothers.

It was God who brought them from hatred to reconciliation.

In the Psalm, there are also a couple of common scripts that are not chosen.

In all likelihood, the scope of the situation is larger here than in the Joseph story.

The ones to whom the Psalm is addressed seem to have little control over the evil
that they are encountering.

Nevertheless, despite the limited responses that are available, they do have some options.

They fret, they are angry, they are impatient.

We know this script well; it is the script the Psalmist is urging us to let go of.

But the counter script is not to be passive; another script we know well.

It's a common script to simply do nothing in the face of overwhelming evil.

The counter script to which this Psalm calls us is a theological understanding
from which to act against evil and evil doers.

The theology of the Psalm, clearly and decisively undercuts the status quo.
The counter script is that Lord is not on the side of evil.

Evil will not have the last word.

The evil ones shall be exposed for who they are and what they are doing.

Page | 6 That is the theological perspective that undergirds the love of enemies.

It is a posture, an attitude of trust that transforms fretting and fear,
into calm and confident actions of doing good,
of paying attention to the joys of life,
and living well on the land,
praising the God who holds all things in clear proportion.

All of this, of course, leads us back to our mega-text, Luke's portrayal of Jesus
teaching on the level plain, as Suella put it last week.

Being angry is the script, not the counter script, which is not to say that anger doesn't have uses.

Anger can be powerfully motivating and connective.

Anger often comes from deep within our compassion.

But it is not the counter script for loving our enemies.

Being nice to our enemies is also the script, not the counter script.

To overlook evil is to regard the enemy as less than human.

To accept evil passively is to undercut the moral core of our enemy.

The counter script is to choose reconciliation over revenge.

The counter script is to expose and shame the doers of evil,
with activism, public confrontation, surprising acts of mercy and trust.

The counter script is to do good;

to partner with God,

to be the children of God,

our God, the God,

who shows mercy,

to the just and unjust,

to us, the just and the unjust.

