

Sermon: Who Are Our Enemies?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Feb. 20, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Arthur C. Brooks, a columnist, social scientist, professor and the former president of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, gave a passionate speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, on February 2020, on the theme of 'love your enemies'. He outlined the biggest crisis facing the United States of America and many other nations today, as the crisis of 'contempt and polarization that is tearing our society apart'. Quoting Arthur Schopenhauer, a 19th century philosopher, who said, "contempt is the conviction of the utter worthless of another human being." Brooks then added, "When you are treated with contempt, you never forget it."

It was a short yet powerful speech where he urged his fellow Americans not to see their political opponents as enemies, but to love them, reach out to them, and to answer hatred with love. Following the examples and teaching of Jesus, Brooks gave a sort of home work assignment to the 3,500 people gathered that night in Washington: "Ask God to give you strength to do these hard things, to go against your human nature, to follow Jesus's teaching. You believe in Jesus's teaching. Act like it! Love your enemy. Ask God to take political contempt from your heart. And sometimes when it is too hard, ask God to help you to fake it."

Somewhere during that speech, Brooks called for a show of hand, asking "How many of you love somebody with whom you politically disagree?" Most people raised their hands, except President Donald Trump, seated two away from the speaker. Brooks scanned the room briefly, chuckled, and said, "I'm going to round that off to 100%." Then he added politely, "the rest of you are on your phones."

Except, President Trump wasn't on his phone. His contempt for the message of the speaker was so obvious, that he didn't even have the politeness to fake it that night. When it was his turn to address the gathered crowd, President Trump opened with this line, "I don't know if Arthur's going to like what I'm going to say," He then proceeded to attack his political rivals—Mitt Romney and Nancy Pelosi— saying, "I don't like people who

use faith as justification for doing what they know is wrong....Nor do I like people who say, 'I'll pray for you', when I know that is not so."

Evidently, claiming to be Christian, President Trump has no qualm about attacking the faith lives of his political rivals. Neither does he have any issue in dismissing the Christian ethic at the heart of the keynote address, or in disregarding the core tenet of Jesus's teaching—love your enemies.

Who are our enemies?

The Scripture passage last week brought us to the sermon on the plain, in the Gospel Luke 6, where Jesus pronounced these four blessings: "Blessed are you who are poor...blessed are you who are hungry now... blessed are you who weep now...blessed are you who are persecuted, or excluded or reviled or defamed on the account of the Son of Man". It is then followed by these four woes: "But woe to you who are rich...woe to you who are full now...woe to you who are laughing now...woe to you when all speak well of you..."

The Lectionary text takes us, this week, immediately following these woes, in verse 27-28, where Jesus kind of retorted himself, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

The parallel passage in Matthew 5 is even more striking. We see the same reversal where Jesus said, in verse 43, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Love you enemies! What a novel concept in the time of Jesus. But who in fact are our enemies?

In Judaism, loving one's neighbour is a commandment, explicitly stated in Leviticus 19:18. Whereas, to hate enemies was implicit in the Scripture, extrapolated from various passages such as: Psalm 31:6, "You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the Lord."; or Psalm 119:113, "I hate the double-minded, but I love your law."; or Psalm 139:21, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?"

Two things we should take note here: 1) Passages in Psalm do not rise to the level as commandments, such as those in the Torah. Passages

in Psalm are more of pious practices that one should give heed. 2) The enemies in those passages are enemies of God, not of one's own.

Too often we confuse the two, thinking enemies of mine are also God's enemies. Too often we think God is on our side, when in fact we are called to be on God's side. Not the same at all. Yet, Jesus overturns the old way of thinking, the old way of doing, all them same, perhaps knowing how easily we erect enemies out of adversaries, like a mountain out of a molehill.

When I hear strangers talking in a strange language, perhaps in Arabic or some other, in a packed airplane. Do I not pay extra attention, an extra glance in their direction just to make sure? Or when I confront that schoolyard bully to a fight, thinking I am absolutely in the right. Have I forgotten to examine my ulterior motive that the bully was actually dating a girl I like? Or when I get frustrated over a social media post, for the one last time, by this cyber 'friend' of mine. Would I not simply 'unfriend' her, block her and block myself from her, so I no longer have to come across her view on the vaccine mandate? Or when I place the bread of Holy Communion into the hand of that particularly individual, who has given me nothing but trouble, whom I know is secretly orchestrating my ouster. Did I not secretly utter, "the body of Christ, except for you"?

Love your enemies! Oh how I wish that Jesus was immediately challenged by a Pharisee or an expert in the Law, asking "Who are our enemies?" Oh how I wish Jesus would then tell an equally compelling story just like the parable of the Good Samaritans, just so we have a good understanding of who exactly our enemies are. But that is not to be.

What we do have in the Scripture, is a description on the how, in verse 27-30, "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Jesus then proceeds to elaborate, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." Jesus then concludes with this golden rule in verse 31, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Some have rightly pointed out this particular teaching of Jesus, often reduced to a shorten phrase of 'turning the other cheek', is quite problematic in the hands of those have power, who could misuse it to justify continuing abuses of that same power against the powerless. Scholars such as Walter Wink have looked at this passage in much greater details,

and have re-interpreted this teaching of Jesus, from the point of view of the oppressed.

It is not my intention to dive into Wink's exegesis today, but to simply focus on what Jesus had originally intended, that is to urge his followers to put their trust in God, who is merciful, holy, and just—a God who listens to prayer, who has a preferential love for those on the margin of a society. And in time, Jesus would not only teach us, he would show us at the foot of the cross, what loving our enemies is all about.

I'll leave you today with a story of the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, BC, in 1983, recounted by Craig E. Anderson, an observer to the event.

A motion was brought to the floor, calling for an end to the practice of apartheid in South Africa. Before a vote could be taken, a diminutive man wearing a magenta clerical shirt stepped quickly up to a floor microphone. He introduced himself, "My name is Desmond tutu." He lauded the motion and thanked the resolutions committee for its work. In a soft-spoken voice he said (as paraphrased by the observer):

"I have only one concern about the declaration. I note the absence of any expression of love for our white South African brothers and sisters, even those who support the existing unjust policy that's so destructive to my people and our nation. We, of course, want change; indeed, we must have change. But we want our oppressors to know that though we oppose their policies, we wish them no ill. Fairness and just treatment for all people in South Africa is all that we want, and when this policy is eventually overturned, we want to work side by side with all South Africans toward peace and reconciliation in our nation."

It was an electric moment. A hush fell over the assembly, as if the presence and power of the Holy Spirit was in their midst. Bishop Tutu moved that the resolution be sent back to committee for the inclusion of these sentiments. The motion received unanimous approval.

Who are our enemies? It turns out they are our brothers and sisters also.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.