

**Love Your Enemies:**  
**In Celebration of Martin Luther King Day**  
*Sermon by Rev. Kent C. Matthies*

*This sermon was delivered at the same Unitarian Society of Germantown pulpit at which  
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on December 11, 1960.  
A nearby plaque commemorates that occasion.*

~ ~ ~

*From Saint Matthew to Gandhi to Dr. King, there is a powerful tradition of  
sending love to all people, even enemies. This must be one of the most challenging and  
daunting of religious principles. Our world and our souls may be saved if we can do it.  
(January 18, 2004)*

~ ~ ~

Throughout the ages, people and civilizations have debated how to treat their enemies. Jesus, Gandhi and King are three of the people to whom I most often look first when ruminating on the challenges of engaging one's enemy. These three giants of the last 2,000 years all lead movements based upon working for justice, love and peace while they directly encountered hate and violence. Facing daunting circumstances, these three people preached about loving one's enemy all the way to their murders. This concept was a major part of Dr. King's theological core; hence I think it appropriate to return to this topic in this worship service where we mark his life and contributions.

With many theological discussions, it helps to begin reflecting at the personal level. As we build our own philosophies and theologies it often makes sense to build upon our personal experiences and beliefs and work out towards our communities and the world. At the personal level we probably do not have agreement on a definition for the word *enemy*. The roots of the word *enemy* come from the Latin word *inimicus*, which means *not friend*. Enemy implies someone who has hostility, or ill will towards us. Throughout our lives we find ourselves in situations in which we experience animosity. There are people who don't like us for who we are or for what we do. There are people who would like to see us fail. These people don't necessarily dislike or hate us all the time, but we feel their ill will. To believe otherwise would be naive.

People may not like you because of how you look. This could involve your body type, grooming styles, or ethnicity. People may not like you

because of your hobbies or your job. People may not like you because of your success or fortune. People may not like you because of your pain or failures. The list continues as to why certain people may hold a grudge and act with some level of maliciousness towards you.

#### Self Examination:

Look at the splinter in your own eye first. What are positive ways in which we can respond when we experience animosity or ill will from another person? People who are feeling animosity or unfairness from others often benefit from beginning with a process of self-examination. This may seem counterintuitive. Why should I look at myself when the other person is doing me wrong? But Jesus often told people to focus on the log in their own eye before fixating on the splinter in the eye of the other person.

One reason we engage in self-examination is that many times conflict is a two-way street. I recently read about two neighbors who got themselves into quite a little battle. It began when one man complained about his neighbor's new fence. It left a dark area behind the garage where gang members might hang out, he felt. In response to this complaint, the neighbor-lady—with the fence—asked that he not put his recycling bins on the public parkway in front of her house because they were killing the grass. In retaliation, the man "blew leaves back onto her property, let his weeds grow 12 inches high, and aimed a fake security camera at her yard." Then she "moved his recycling bins, complained to police about snow plowed onto her land and bought new shades and drapery to cover her windows." The village where the two neighbors live finally wrote an ordinance that prohibited the man from putting his recycling bins close to his neighbor's house. The man defied the ordinance and has been given 10 citations and charged \$1,000 in fines. The case has now gone to court. The man has recently been quoted as saying, "Now we are digging in." <sup>1</sup>

Obviously this conflict took on a life of it's own, became quite public, and had humorous overtones. But can't you identify with the feeling of being swept away in a series of overreactions? I can. Doesn't this happen to most of us with conversations and verbal responses? Even if we are not engaged in the same behavior as our enemy, we can almost always benefit from looking at our own thoughts and behaviors for which we can take

---

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Black, "Glenview Neighbors Recycle Feud from Fence to Weeds to Bins on Parkway," *Chicago Tribune* (6-04-01)

responsibility and make commitments for positive change. At times when we are locked into a struggle with a person we feel like open warfare has been declared. We feel like we can't be polite, respectful or kind anymore because we will naively open ourselves up for more injury. By simply slowing things down, taking a step back and taking deep breaths we can begin the process of lowering the pain. Our encounters with enemies can become opportunities for our own growth.

Somebody has got to have religion or ethics enough to stop hating and to inject love into the very structure of the universe.

After stopping the acts of hostility, loving your enemy is a next step. People are capable of actively engaging their enemies with kindness. Dr. King commonly repeated the phrase, "Somebody has got to have religion or ethics enough to stop hating and to inject love into the very structure of the universe." He believed that responding to hate with hate, only increases hate. Responding to hate with love, can and ultimately will change the flow of hearts and history.

The Dalai Lama provides an inspirational and perhaps daunting example of injecting love into the very structure of the universe. The Dalai Lama lives in exile while serving as the political leader of Tibet—a land under Chinese control. Yet he says that he harbors no hatred of the Chinese, even though he says they have been responsible for the deaths of more than 1.2 million Tibetans—one-sixth of the populations—since 1950. He explained to reporters, "My logic is something quite simple: if I keep a negative feeling toward the Chinese, it will not harm the Chinese, it will harm myself. I will lose sleep, I will lose appetite . . . and ruin myself. Compassion and forgiveness is something very important and crucial. Without anger and with a friendly attitude you can act more effectively."

I want all to note that one of the reasons that the Dalai Lama doesn't keep negative feelings towards the Chinese is because he doesn't want to ruin himself. This attitude demonstrates another stage in the process of self-examination. Not only can we benefit from taking responsibility for our own part in cycles of wrong-doing—we can also benefit from choosing to let go of anger and hatred. Dr. King said, "Hate is like an eroding acid which

eats away the best center of your life.”<sup>2</sup> Hate destroys all of your soul’s creative and positive capacities.

Many people recommend that one pray for his or her enemy. This is one way to stop hating and to inject love into the very structure of the universe. But many times we need to act in order to put arms and legs onto our prayers. Viewing regular folks living out this philosophy in their own lives is one of the miracles of humanity.

After 125 years, the infamous feud between the Hatfields and McCoys is finally history. Sixty descendants of the original clans gathered on Saturday, June 14, 2003, in Pikefield, Kentucky, to sign a document declaring an official end to more than a century of hatred and bloodshed. The feuding between the McCoys of Kentucky and Hatfields of West Virginia began in 1878 when Randolph McCoy accused one of the Hatfields of stealing a hog. Feelings festered and other incidents occurred that finally resulted in the shooting death of Ellison Hatfield in 1882. Retaliation begat retaliation until the feud claimed the lives of 11 more family members over the next ten years. Subsequent conflicts between the two clans have involved court battles over timber rights and cemetery plots.

The treaty calling for peace reads: "We do hereby and formally declare an official end to all hostilities, implied, inferred, and real, between the families, now and forevermore. We ask by God's grace and love that we be forever remembered as those that bound together the hearts of two families to form (one) family of freedom in America."

Reo Hatfield, first thought of the ceremony, which has injected love into the very structure of the universe. Reo said, "We are saying that you do not have to fight forever."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the Hatfields and the McCoys would come in and help the two neighbors who are feuding over garbage cans, recycling bins, and blowing snow and leaves. Dr. King taught that at that time when you have the upper hand, when you have the opportunity to embarrass, hurt, injure, or destroy your enemy . . . you must not. When you have the power advantage over your enemy, that is the time to love that person.

---

<sup>2</sup> *A Knock at Midnight: Sermons of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Ed. Clayborne Carson, p.53

<sup>3</sup> Citation: Stephen Leon Alligood, "American Profile," CBS News.com (6-14-03);

It is amazing how often we can redeem our enemies with love. We often hear stories of others in painful, difficult, and seemingly trapped situations. I know a woman who has understandably been frustrated with her boss for many years. Jane's supervisor has always treated her awkwardly. Jane is never quite sure whether it is through some odd form of maliciousness or simply ineffectiveness, that her boss causes her more work and trouble. He never seems to realize or acknowledge the extra work he puts on her plate. Yet she has found a way to realize that he is actually a lonely and sad person himself. Instead of brewing with anger about all the troubles her boss causes her, Jane has taken a spiritual path. She has realized that her boss needs her more than she needs him. At times she asks him to have a meal together or just talks with him about their personal lives. She realizes that he needs a kind person in his life and she plays that role. When we hear about people rising above the fray and injecting good will or love into situations of pettiness, jealousy, anger, or maliciousness, we can see and feel new possibilities for ourselves.

Looking at that Big Picture:

This would be an incomplete sharing of Dr. King's theology of loving your enemy if I did not speak about national and international issues. Dr. King taught that these truths could only be fully realized if embraced by larger communities and nations of the world. He dedicated his life to organizing mass nonviolent resistance based on the principle of love. Currently our nation is spending more than any nation in the history of the world on weapons of mass destruction. Consistently talking about "you are either with us or against us" is ultimately only going to bring us backwards as a society. I don't think loving our enemies is to be found anywhere in the dialogues happening in circles of power. I think it is the role of the church to stand up and say this is not the way. As a nation we are not realizing our potential for injecting love into the structure of the universe. We can do so much better.

Today, here in this sanctuary, many of us realize that as individuals, communities, and as a nation, we may have been struggling under the illusion of inaccurate visions. With many threats on his life on November 17<sup>th</sup> of 1957, Dr. King preached "Love Your Enemies" at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He ended that sermon with these words, "So this morning, as I look into your eyes, and into the eyes of all of my brothers in Alabama, and all over America and over the world, I say to you, 'I love you. I would rather die than hate you.' And I am foolish

enough to believe that through the power of this love, somewhere, men of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will all be in God's Kingdom. We will be able to matriculate into the university of eternal life because we had the power to love our enemies, to bless those persons that cursed us, to even decide to be good to those persons who hated us, and we even pray for those persons who spitefully used us.”<sup>4</sup>

Let us pray for more clarity of vision. Let us pray for more wisdom to do the right thing. Let us pray to find the power to inject love into the very structure of the universe. AMEN.

- copyright © 2004, Kent C. Matthies

---

<sup>4</sup> ibid. p. 59