

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 4, 2010 (Independence Day)*

“Love your enemies.” I hate that! First of all, it’s no fun. There’s nothing like a good nemesis to get the blood both flowing and boiling. Second of all, it’s nearly impossible to do – it’s counterintuitive. We’re supposed to *hate* our enemies; that’s why they’re called enemies and not friends. But here comes Jesus again ruining our fun. “Love your enemies,” he tells us, “and pray for those who persecute you.”

Many of us derive great emotional energy from hating. I knew an older woman at my first parish in Baltimore who came regularly to the 8 o’clock service. She vehemently opposed the ordination of women and so whenever our female deacon would pass by with the chalice she would dramatically cross her arms across her chest and turn her head away. It was sad not just because she couldn’t get past something that had taken place 25 years ago but because she derived such energy from her negativity. I can’t imagine she was able to receive the sacrament with joy and wonder while she was in a posture of anger and resentment. Of course she also hated the Peace and once wrote a letter to the bishop complaining that people called me “Father Tim” rather than using my last name. But, still, my heart grieved for this woman who outwardly seemed to take such pleasure in her attitude of anger but inwardly must have had an aching and broken heart.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies it’s partly for them but mostly for us. It’s nearly impossible to maintain a healthy spiritual life when we hold on to anger; when we let hatred rather than love rule our hearts. But it’s a lot easier. Just listen to talk radio or go online and read all of the anonymous comments or even hang out in some churches. There are plenty of people who love to spread hatred.

It’s interesting that the readings for Independence Day include the line about loving our enemies. It’s almost as if there’s an expectation that as a nation we will have enemies in the world. And it’s generally true. While the world changes and the geo-political landscape evolves, through it all we seem to be in a constant state of war. Yet at a national level it would be unheard of for a politician to stand up and call on us to love our enemies; to love those who seek to do us harm; to love those whose interests and aims differ from our own. Talk about political suicide. And yet that’s precisely what Jesus asks us to do. Not because he’s politically naïve but because he points to a kingdom that transcends the nations and principalities of the current age – a kingdom more important than any country we may form or create in this world. And if we have so much trouble loving our enemies as a nation we, as Christians, can at least model this by attempting to love our enemies in our own lives and in our own communities.

But this is difficult to do. Because Jesus calls us not just to tolerate our enemies or to put up with our enemies or to co-exist with our enemies but to love them. And that goes against every

natural, human inclination. So how do you love your enemies? First, you pray for them. And that doesn't mean that you pray for them to come around to your point of view. That's easy – "Lord, help Bob to see the error of his ways." That's not prayer; that's being holier than thou. In prayer we hold others up to God's eternal care; we recognize that they are children of God; and we acknowledge the hard but absolute truth that we ourselves do not have all the answers.

To pray for your enemies and for those who do you harm is to let go of the hatred. It is to recognize that hate only really hurts *us*. Because hate is an attitude of the heart. And so when we hate – whether overtly or subtly – we don't leave room in our hearts to be faithful. It is impossible to truly love God and love neighbor when the bile of hatred bubbles up to the surface.

Forgiveness is also an important part of loving your enemies. When we have been wronged – really wronged not just the perception of being wronged – forgiveness is critical. There have been some highly publicized examples of this in recent years. Many of you remember the spotlight of forgiveness that shined on the Amish community after a shooting inside a one-room schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Their response to the shooting was as countercultural as their refusal to own telephones. In the aftermath of that tragedy, the family of the shooter was prayed for and literally embraced by the Amish community. One of the speakers at the memorial service told of an Amish neighbor who came into the kitchen of the killer's house, wrapped his arms around the gunman's father, and said "We will forgive you."

More than the movie of the same name, *this* was the "witness." A testament to the power and strength of faith. Because to many of us, forgiveness in the face of such horror seemed as odd as not owning a television. "Real" Americans would seek justice through retaliation. And so it's easy to write off the more reasoned and sensitive response as the naïve reaction of a fringe religious sect.

But maybe the Amish have it right. Perhaps forgiveness is the appropriate starting point for healing the deep wounds of a violence and hatred. As a nation the Amish response gives us much to reflect upon in our own dealings with the world community. And as people of faith they give us much to reflect upon in our own dealings with one another.

Prayer and forgiveness are crucial parts of what it means to love our enemies. We may not have an "archenemy." Unlike Superman we don't have Lex Luthor as an evil villain. Unlike Jerry Seinfeld we don't have Newman as a nemesis. But there are people who hurt us that we must pray for and forgive if we are to grow in our relationship with God. It may be an estranged family member or friend; someone who abandoned us or hurt us in some way. We can hold onto our anger and take it to the grave or we can pray and forgive and fill that hatred in our hearts with space for God. As difficult as it can be, Jesus gently guides us toward love.