

Leaning in to the messy / Love your enemies

7.1: “You have heard it was said, love your friends ...”

March 6, 2016

Do you have any enemies? I’m not talking, “competitors,” or “rivals,” I’m talking real enemies. Jon Sutphin is a North Carolina fan. Does that make him an enemy of any true-blue Kentucky fan? That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about serious stuff. Dictionary.com calls an enemy “a person who feels hatred for, who fosters harmful designs against, or who engages in antagonistic activities against another.” Do you have any of that kind of enemy, people you are flat out against, of who are flat out against you?

Now if you have been around here for a while you will know that I am not as nice as most of you. So if God forced me to come clean and fill out an enemies list, I suspect there’s be quite a few names on my list. I’m 47 years old. That’s long enough for a cantankerous twit like me to get a few names on his list. So let’s say my enemies list has two columns. Column one: people I ... despise. Now I have rarely reached the level of hatred, I think just twice, by my reckoning. But there are people against whom I have felt pretty strong animosity, resentment, and bitterness. There are times, I am embarrassed to admit, when I have wanted to “get even” with someone has hurt me or mine. There are even times when I would have taken some pleasure in seeing an enemy “get his.” I told you, I’m not as nice as most of you; I’m certainly not nice enough to be your pastor.

Then there’s column two: people who despise me ... I think there’d be a boatload of names on that list. As a teacher (a professor), as a pastor (a leader), there are always people who disagree with what I say, or what I do – sometimes passionately. And when a person is as outspoken, and stubborn, and sometimes as cantankerous as I can be, that can stir a whole lot of anger, and animosity, and opposition. So there are those who have come after my head. And sometimes they have gotten it.

How about you? Do you have an enemies list? If God gave you a sheet of paper with two columns and forced you to be honest, would you have any names in column 1? Are there are people against whom you have felt strong animosity, resentment, or bitterness? If you were completely transparent, are there times that you took pleasure in seeing one of your

enemies go down? And would there be any names on your column 2? Are there people who have despised you? Who have felt a passionate antipathy towards you, who would have taken pleasure in seeing you fall? Maybe they even did their best to knock you down? Guys, if your enemies list is blank, if you have no enemies, then I suspect one of two things is happening. Either you are self-deluded, or you don't stand for much. You are certainly not an outspoken Jesus follower.

Now ... there are times when I don't like what Jesus tells us to do. It doesn't mean I don't try to do it, it just means I don't like it much. You see, we create these neat little boxes and then we put the people into one of our little boxes. I decide who goes into which box ... And then Jesus comes along and he tears apart my boxes. He comes along and tears apart your boxes. In fact he stomps on them, and rips them up, and takes them out to the burn pile. And because we are Jesus followers, we say ... "(deep sigh) Okay, we'll try it your way." And then, at some point, we will discover that his way was smarter than our way...

We're turning the corner this morning. This is our last mini-series in our study on "Leaning in to the messy." In January we focused in on part B of the second greatest commandment. Jesus told us that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And then he said that a second command was equally important: We are to love our neighbors ... as we love ourselves. That's part B: "as we love ourselves." But that can be hard. It's hard for a lot of us to love ourselves the way God wants us to. Instead we wear masks. So in January we talked about throwing away the masks.

And then last month, February, we talked about part A of the second greatest commandment: the "love your neighbor" part. And we lasered in on four groups of neighbors that God has a special tenderness for. We called them "the quartet of the vulnerable": the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the immigrants. God wants us to lean in to the marginal, to those we are prone to look past. Now we get that. We don't always do it well, but we do understand what God wants us to do and why.

But that's not enough. Jesus wasn't content to leave it with "love your neighbor, as you love yourself." He tells us to go way beyond loving our neighbors. Because for those of us who like loopholes, we might try

asking some stupid question like, “Well, who is my neighbor?” If I have to love my neighbor, then who is my neighbor? So Jesus kind of slams the door on our loopholes. He says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, (but you can go ahead and) hate your enemies.’ (Yeah ... that makes sense,) But now I tell you: love your enemies (too) and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5.43-44) Huh?! Is he serious? I can get “love God,” and “love your neighbor,” but “love your enemies” too, and “pray for” those who are coming against you?! Is that even possible?

Well, let me show you what the people around Jesus were thinking, and how Jesus stomped on, and ripped up, and burned their boxes. The people were actually quoting the Bible, kind of. You know how sometimes we act like we’re quoting the Bible, but we’re actually twisting it up? Well here’s what the Bible says. This is from Moses, it’s in the book of Leviticus, a part of their law. Moses says, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but (instead) love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19.18) So they figured, “I guess I have to love a fellow Israelite,” but it doesn’t say anything about those who aren’t fellow Israelites. If God specifically tells me to love my neighbor, then it looks like I don’t have to love them if they’re not my neighbor. Right? That’s how we’d read it.

Because that makes sense, doesn’t it? Of course God wants me to love you guys, you’re part of our church family. Some of you make it hard, but it’s clearly what God wants. And of course God wants me to love other Christians, that makes sense. Some of them make it really hard, but it’s clearly what God wants. And I suppose God wants me to love my neighbors here in Frankfort, or my neighbors here in Kentucky. We need to treat our own right, don’t we, as long as they don’t misbehave too badly? That’s kind of what they figured back then; that’s still kind of what people figure today.

And then Jesus pokes his nose in and says something no one else was saying. It was almost absurd, what he said; it was almost ... immoral. Jesus says, But I say, love your enemies (too)! (and uh,) Pray for those who persecute you.” He doesn’t say “pray at” them, or “pray against” them – that would make sense to us. He says, “Pray for” your enemies, “pray

on behalf of” your enemies, “pray for the sake of” those who persecute you. Really?!

Now I want to press pause for just a moment. There are a couple of things Jesus is not saying. #1: Jesus is not saying that you won't have enemies. Guys, there are going to be people who hurt you. And there are going to be people who hate you. I'm serious! Jesus said, “If they hated me, they're going to hate you.” Guys, you could do everything right in this world, you could live perfectly, and some people are still going to hate you. They did it to Jesus. But the fact is, all the rest of us are sinners. I have done things that have given other people the right to despise me. And every person in my world has done things that have given me the right to despise them. We are broken people, living in a broken world. Jesus isn't saying we'll never have enemies, he's just telling us what to do for them.

And there is one more thing Jesus is not saying. #2: He's not saying that we can't despise what an enemy is doing. Loving my enemy does not require that I support what he is doing. Guys, there are things a God-honoring man or a God-honoring woman should hate. I hate child abuse. I hate bullying. I hate men using women. I hate women treating men with disrespect. I hate self-centered twits luring our kids into addictions. I hate unfaithfulness. I hate lying. I hate pretense. I hate sin – even my own. Don't you? Shouldn't you? If you don't hate what is corrupting and destroying you, if you don't hate what is corrupting and destroying those you love, what's wrong with you?

God hates that stuff, too, doesn't he? God hates sin. God hates anything that tears his children away from him. He hates anything that draws us away from the good he wants for us. You see, God has this capacity to love and hate simultaneously. He loves me, at the same time he hates my sin ... so do I. He loves you right now, just as you are; and he hates your sin, right now, the sin that is pulling you down. I hope you hate it too. In fact, he hates our sin because he loves us, because he wants the best for us. So when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he's not telling us to love what they are doing. It goes way deeper than that.

He's telling us to love people anyway, to love people as indiscriminately as he does. To love without ... discrimination. Whether they are on his side, or against him. Whether they are on your side (your neighbors), or

whether they are against you (your enemies) – love them, he says. “In that way,” he says, “you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven,” because that’s what he does. (Matthew 5.45) In that way, he says, you’ll be treating people like God does – like Father, like sons ... and daughters.

Now, the only way we can do it, the only way we can love our enemies – God’s way – is to correct our notions of love. You see, we’ve got love all screwed up. Our culture has love all screwed up. We think love is all about our feelings. If I am emotionally attracted to you, maybe I love you. If I am not emotionally attracted to you, then I’m sure I don’t love you. And that is a kind of love: the Bible calls it “eros.” But “eros” is not the word Jesus uses. This is not a self-centered emotional kind of love. The word in Matthew is “agape.” It’s a selfless kind of love, an action kind of love, not a feeling kind of love. I can agape people I don’t like. You married guys, you ever love your wife when you don’t like her? I hope so! Parents, you ever love your kids when you don’t like them much? I hope so. Ladies, how about you? If your marriage is healthy, if your marriage is God-honoring, you keep on loving your partner even when he is not very loveable, don’t you? You still take care of him. You still want the best for him. You still ... pray for him. And Jesus says, “Love your enemies too.” You love your enemies the same way God loves you. In fact, if you try to love your enemies the way God loves you, you’ll get some idea of how amazing his grace really is...

But it is hard. I know it’s hard. It’s hard to love someone when they have hurt you, or yours. It’s hard to love someone when you hate what they are doing. It’s hard to love someone when you have “the right” to be angry, to get even. It’s hard to love someone when they despise you. In fact, it’s harder than most of us can do ... on our own. But Jesus says, “In that way (in loving your enemies), you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven (because that’s what he does). For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” (Matthew 5.45)

In fact, he says, “If you love only those who love you (if you do it the way they do it out there), what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much (anyone can do that; even the jerks). If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even

pagans do that.” (Matthew 5.46-47) Jesus says, I want you to be different. I want you to go beyond what other people do. I want them to look at you and see something that blows their minds. He says, “You are to be ... perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5.48) Huh?! Jesus says, “Don’t lower the bar; when they look at you, they need to see him.” And I’m telling you guys, on your own you can’t do it. But if Jesus tells you to do something, he’ll help you get it done, if you trust him.

So let’s go back to where we started. Do you have any enemies? I’m not talking “rivals,” or “competitors.” Are there people you despise? Are there people who stir in you a pretty serious animosity, some intense resentment? Are there those you’d like to see go down? Who are the hardest people in your world to love? Or flip it around. Are there those who despise you; who harbor serious animosity towards you, who resent you intensely? Are there people in your life who would take pleasure in seeing you go down?

You see, most of us could put some names in both columns of our enemies list. There are names I would put in column A: People who have hurt me, or who have hurt someone I love; people who believe things, or say things, or do things I am diametrically opposed to – things I consider dangerous. And there are names I would put in column B: people who would consider me their enemy. Because I have hurt them, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. Or I have hurt someone they love. And because sometimes I stand for things they despise, things they consider dangerous.

We’ve all got enemies. And here’s the deal, often times our fiercest enemies are those we are closest to. Sometimes the easiest people to hate are those we used to love.

- When neighbors become enemies, it can get ugly. I have a friend who shot his neighbor – killed him -- during a fight over a strip of land they both called theirs. When neighbors become enemies, it can get ugly.
- It’s even uglier when it happens in church. Guys, when “Jesus-followers” in the same church family become enemies, it tears the heart out of that church family. In fact it can, I think, quench the power of the Spirit in that church. It can cripple the work of that church. Guys, there is little more ugly, there is little more Spirit

quenching, than people who claim to be Jesus followers who are at war with each other and going through the motions of worship together. Really?! I think God weeps, sometimes.

- And it's so ugly when it happens in our homes! When a husband and a wife who promised love till death do us part ... when they become enemies. Or when a kid and a parent become enemies; or when a brother and a sister become enemies. It is so God-dishonoring, it is so devastating to everyone caught up in the ugliness. Have you ever seen it? Have you ever been there, done it? Maybe you are there right now?

Guys, Jesus wasn't just saying words. He was challenging who we are, and what we do every day. Who would be on your enemies list, right now? Philip Yancey scratched his head and offered some of these as possibilities ...

- Maybe you have a jealous colleague at work, or a jealous classmate at school. And maybe they undermine you in some way. Maybe they spread gossip about you, or twist something you said into something you didn't mean. Maybe they poison your friends against you. Someone like that on your list?
- Or maybe you have had a bad boss. Have you ever had a boss who was a jerk? Maybe he was always finding fault, and never giving credit where it was due. Or maybe he or she stole credit for something you did? Or maybe they were just mean, or self-centered. Anyone like that on your enemies list?
- Or have you ever had someone steal from you? Maybe they broke into your home, or your car, or your locker, or your desk. Maybe they stole from your business. Or maybe they just ripped you off on a business deal.
- Or maybe there is someone who hurt your husband, or your wife, or your kids, or your grandkids. I'm telling you guys, there is very little that will fire me up more quickly than someone who hurts my wife or my kids. You mess up my family, you corrupt my kids, or my grandkids, and we've got issues – big ones. Ever been in that spot? Would they make your enemies list?
- Or have you ever rubbed shoulders with someone who cheats on their spouse? And you can see what their cheating is doing to their spouse, and their kids ... and their life with God. And it stirs this righteous rage – in you?

- Or have you ever been close to someone and watched as they abused their kids? Sometimes I'll watch a child disrespect a parent, and I'll want to wear that kid out. And sometimes I'll watch a parent abuse a kid verbally, or physically, and it both breaks my heart, and fires me up. You? Anyone like that on your list?
- Or have you ever listened to someone spew some racist bigotry at someone just because they look different, or talk different? Guys, I have a Columbian daughter (Victoria), and a Mexican daughter (Giovanna). They started out in our home as exchange students, but they became our kids. So when I hear people spew venom at someone just because they are a Mexican, or because they are a different color, that fires me up.
- Or how about a corrupt politician, a politician who uses his position to elevate himself rather than the people he was elected to serve? Do they fire you up?
- How about a person who despises you, just because you are a Republican, or a Democrat?
- How about a person who despises you, just because you are a Christian?

Guys, you have enemies. As long as we live in this broken world, a world that is at war with God, we will have enemies. As long as I am a sinner, as long as you are a sinner, we'll have enemies. So ... what do we do about it? Jesus says, "You have heard people say, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! (In fact, I'm telling you to) Pray for those who persecute you!" I want you to agape them; and to pray for them. Really?!

Julie and I went out on a date Thursday evening. We went to Fazolis, because we were living it up. Those garlic breadsticks are killers. Maybe it was the breadsticks, but I woke up early Friday thinking about something really weird. You see, when we got home on Thursday night I watched the rest of the Republican Presidential Debate, and they were treating each other so badly. The vitriol, the venom, mocking each other, insulting each other, twisting each other's words, searching for "gotchas." It sounded like some couples I have listened to who are heading for a divorce. And I woke up Friday morning wondering how things might have been different if Donald Trump, and Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio had been praying "for" each other before the debate – like Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and

pray for them. Now I am not letting the Democrats off the hook. Hillary Clinton is behaving just as badly. Can you imagine Donald Trump, on his knees, praying for Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio and Hillary Clinton? Can you imagine Hillary Clinton, on here knees, praying for Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, and Ted Cruz? Or do you think these words of Jesus simply don't apply to politicians, even if they claim to be Christian?

But that was fantasy. I think that was a fantasy induced by too many absolutely perfect garlic breadsticks. But this isn't a fantasy: Can we do it? Can we love our enemies, and pray for those who come against us? Can we Jesus followers do it here at Capital City? Can our husbands and wives, who are at war with each other, actually try praying for each other – just because he tells us to? Can our parents and kids, who are at war with each other, try praying for each other – just because we are Jesus followers, and he tells us to? When there are tensions inside these walls, can those who “despise” each other in this family try praying for each other, so we can act like sons of our Father, who is in heaven? When we Jesus followers here at Capital City rub shoulders with people outside these walls and they misbehave, can we actually pray for those on our enemies lists? Not against them, but for them, for their sake, on their behalf? Do you think it would change anything at all?

Well ... it would change one thing for sure. It would change your heart. Did you know that just praying for an enemy is an act of love? And did you know that praying for an enemy puts you in a position where God's Spirit can grow you up into something amazing? And did you know that your praying for an enemy might even help God change them? Now they might not change. They may go on being despicable. But as they see the difference in you, maybe a door will open that God's Spirit can use to change their hearts too.

Guys, don't wait till you feel like it; just do it. Love your enemies, because you are a Jesus follower, and that's what we do. Love them by praying for them. So God can clean up your heart, and so that maybe you can create an opening for God to clean up theirs as well.

We're going to sing a song in just a moment. It's about dying to the old, and rising up to something new, something better. It's about our commitment to living this life differently, now that we are Jesus followers.

It says,
Here (in Christ) my absolution, forgiveness for my sin
I sink beneath the waters that Christ was buried in
And now I will rise, as Christ was raised to live
Now in him, now in him I live

Then it says,
I rise as You are risen, I declare Your rule and reign
My life confess Your Lordship, and glorify Your Name