

“Love your Enemies” (Yup, even in Ottawa’s Streets)

Hespeler, 20 February 2022 © Scott McAndless

Genesis 45:3-11, 15, Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40, 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50, [Luke 6:27-38](#)

On Saturday, January 30th, as we are all very aware at this point, a huge protest descended upon the city of Ottawa. As a nation’s capital, Ottawa is hardly a stranger to protest, and many citizens have gotten used to taking them in their stride. But this one was different. It quickly turned into a long-term occupation as tractor trailers were positioned to lock down the streets of the core, filling them with diesel fumes and the incessant blaring of truck horns.

Now, I am quite aware that those who went to Ottawa to protest had their reasons. There were policies that they opposed and that they felt were infringing upon their freedom. I don’t personally agree with their specific concerns nor, apparently, do a majority of Canadians, but I don’t intend to debate their concerns or their demands. I do believe that people, even people that I do not agree with, have the perfect right to air their grievances and seek to have them addressed. But I do have some concerns with how those grievances have been expressed and I also have concerns about the response and what it has been. I do not think that I am alone.

Who are the Enemies?

In our reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks about what it means to have enemies and how we are to deal with our enemies. And I think that that gives us a helpful way to approach these events. “Enemies” is a good way to describe many of the people who have engaged in the drama in our nation’s capital. I know that they are not all one monolithic group, but one thing the convoy people share is apparently their enemies. They would name as their enemies certain political leaders, certain public officials including public health officers. Many would name certain political parties and the policies of those parties. And they have certainly sought to target their enemies with their rhetoric and their actions.

Most would probably not name the citizens of Ottawa as their enemies, but these are the people, especially those that live near Parliament Hill, who have probably suffered the most as a result of their actions. They have seen their freedom of movement and their ability to work curtailed, they have been assailed with non-stop high decibel noise pollution, often so loud that it would be considered torture if prisoners of war were subjected to it. There have been many allegations of harassment and even of attempted arson. As a result of this, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the people of Ottawa have come to see these occupiers very clearly as their enemies, leading to a very strong desire to retaliate against them.



Jesus' Teaching Looks Different Today

All of this means that we have been given a very clear illustration of the kind of situation that Jesus was apparently trying to address in his teaching this morning from the Gospel of Luke. The question, quite simply, is what do you do when you have an enemy? And it is kind of interesting. I have been reading and preaching on this passage of scripture (and other parallel passages) for a very long time. I have preached on this passage when our country has been at war in places like Afghanistan and also when we have been engaged in some very dangerous peace-keeping missions. But I'll tell you something. I don't remember a time when I opened this passage and could be sure that everyone would have as clear an understanding of who was their enemy than at this particular moment in time. And the enemies that we think of are not particularly people who live on other continents. They are a whole lot closer to home. Go up to just about anyone in Ottawa over the past couple of weeks and ask them, who are your enemies, and chances are that they can point one out to you.

We All Think We Know How to Deal with Enemies

So, in many ways, that question of how we deal with our enemies is much more urgent today than I can ever remember. But I would also notice one other thing. There really isn't any discussion about how to deal with them. We're all pretty sure that we know what needs to be done. You can see that, once again, on the streets of Ottawa. We have seen people directing a lot of anger against their perceived enemies, of course. But, beyond that, we also seem to see a whole lot of anger being directed against those who are dealing with enemies in what we see as the wrong ways.

And so, for example, people have been heavily criticizing the police for what is seen as appeasement or for failing to come down hard on the enemies. Others have expressed their anger at the media for failing to represent "our side" with sympathy or for failing to demonize the other side. These sorts of attitudes make it clear that everyone understands that the only way to deal with an enemy is basically to fight fire with fire, to defeat them with strength and power.

Objectionable Advice

That seems to be the context where we find ourselves today, not just in relation to this one occupation, of course, but in many of the events that have taken place in the last couple of years. So, it seems that the topic Jesus is dealing with in our gospel reading has never been more relevant to us than it is right now. And yet, at the same time, the actual advice that Jesus gives for dealing with our enemies has never been more objectionable.

Jesus says, **"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."** And, really, can you imagine somebody getting up and making such a request to any group facing off against any other on the streets of Ottawa? They would be laughed out of the city. It just seems to be absolute foolishness, at least when the enemies we are talking about are not hypothetical but are actually standing right in front of us.

No Way Out of Hate

But I really do think that we need to give some consideration to what Jesus is saying here because here is the real problem. Once we get into that kind of battle where no one is willing to give even basic humanity to their enemies, we very quickly get into a situation where there simply is no way out. When all we can do is hate our enemies, we only end up constantly raising the stakes on each other.

At some point, it actually doesn't matter who is right or who is wrong. It doesn't matter who started it. At the end of the day, we actually need to be able to live with each other once this is all over because otherwise, it's never going to be over, and no one wants to live in a world surrounded by enemies forever. So, even though what Jesus says seems like the wrong thing to do, we really ought to listen to him.

What Jesus isn't Saying

And I would also note that, when he teaches us to love our enemies, he is not simply saying that we should let them have their way with us. For example, Jesus doesn't just say that when someone strikes you on the cheek, you should just let them keep on striking you. No, what Jesus says is, **"If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also."** And I know that that might sound like the same thing, but it isn't. What Jesus is saying is that you need to insist that, if someone's going to strike you, you set the terms for what is happening to you.

The Other Cheek

In that world, the kind of people that Jesus was talking to were used to being struck in certain ways. Most of them were poor and many of them were slaves. And do you know how abusers struck people like that in the ancient world? They struck them with a backhanded blow of the right hand which meant that they were striking you on the right cheek. It was the kind of blow that told you that you were nobody in their sight. So that meant that poor folk and slaves were constantly being struck with backhanded blows on the right cheek. They all knew it. They had all felt it often enough. And, what's more, if you look at some of the other variations of this saying of Jesus, Jesus actually specifies that the first blow is on the right cheek.

But it is very significant that Jesus does not say that you should just let your enemies continue to strike you as they have been. No, Jesus says, you are to invite them to strike you on the other cheek. And that is significantly different in that culture. For them to strike you on the left cheek would mean them striking you with the front of their right hand (because, for reasons I'm not going to go into, you do not touch somebody else with your left hand in that culture).

So essentially what you're inviting them to do is to strike you, and perhaps to strike you harder, with the front of their hand or their fist, but you are insisting that they do so not as a social superior but as an equal. And, in that culture, that was actually something that did more dishonour to them than it did to you. You had essentially shamed them by forcing them to declare that you were their equal.

About the Clothing

Jesus' other advice is very similar. He tells them that if someone takes away your coat, you should give them your tunic as well. Well, in that society people only wore two pieces of clothing, a coat and a tunic. So essentially you are stripping naked in front of your enemy and, once again, in that society that did more damage to their honour than it did to yours.

Now, of course, the specific advice that Jesus is giving here is very much dependent on that culture and how it worked. Obviously, to do the exact same actions today would not have the same results. So, we would accomplish absolutely nothing by going around today inviting our enemies to hit us on our left cheek or take away our tunics. That would have nothing like the impact that Jesus is looking for. It's not the specifics that we should follow but the principles behind them.

The Principles

So, what are the principles, and how might they apply in the kind of situations we are seeing today? I think it does mean that we should not counter our enemies' misbehaviour, abuse or even violence by returning the same back to them. If they force us to become like them by adopting their tactics, then they have won, and we have no victory. But, at the same time, that doesn't mean that we must just let them have their way. If they are going to continue to be abusive or hateful, we are going to have to force them to do that in ways that demonstrate to everyone exactly how dishonourable they are being.

In some cases, that can be pretty straightforward. If someone is being abused in a domestic situation, for example, the course of action is pretty clear in my mind. The abused person first of all needs to get safe and to get anyone else at risk to safety. And secondly, they need to take the steps necessary that expose to the authorities what their abuser has been doing. To simply continue to be abused in the same way, is actually something very different from what Jesus was talking about when he said to turn the *other* cheek. And I certainly wouldn't pretend taking such matters to the authorities is not a very difficult and painful thing for an abused person to do. But it is a painful thing that you do for a purpose, and it is so much better than just continuing to be abused.

Making it Apply in Ottawa's Streets

Now, a complex situation like the occupation of your city is obviously going to be more complex than that. I realize how difficult it is to apply Jesus' advice to that kind of situation. But we still shouldn't forget the overall principle. You cannot defeat your enemies by becoming like them. You need to give them the space to show who they really are.

None of this is easy. In fact, I believe Jesus made it very clear that loving your enemies is about the hardest thing you will ever be asked to do. It is actually a whole lot easier just to enter into a never-ending cycle of retribution and returning violence for violence and hatred for hatred. But that is really not a way to move forward when we actually have to live in the same country and continue to be neighbours and find a way to build a better country for everyone.

So, I would like to end this morning by posing the question and even suggesting that you take some time to discuss it. My question is this, however you define the enemies you see in our society today, how would you apply Jesus' teaching to situations like what we're seeing in Ottawa?