

Agents of Reconciliation

Matthew 5:21-26

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Thirty years ago, grammy-award winning songwriter Kris Kristofferson wrote a verse about hate that has stayed with me through the decades. "Egg Head's cussin Red Neck's cussin' hippies for their hair. Others laugh at straights who laugh at freaks who laugh at squares. Some folks hate the whites who hate the blacks who hate the clan. Most of us hate anything that we don't understand."

Certainly our world is full of hate. It dominates our airwaves. In fact, hatred is now espoused as a virtue. I miss the days of Paul Harvey and Walter Cronkite. Two men with contrasting political views, one leaning to the right, the other to the left but who always treated our national leaders with the utmost respect even as they voiced their disagreement. Those days are gone. Today, if you don't hate, you don't get heard.

Hatred may be promoted in the world as an admirable quality, however, it is not a Christian virtue. In the heart of a follower of Christ, love is suppose to replace hate and yet it often does not. Fred Phelps, a pastor of a small Baptist church in Topeka, Kansas hates homosexuals. In fact, Rev. Phelps brags about how much he hates homosexuals and how much he detests people who have anything but hatred in their hearts for homosexuals. Furthermore, Rev. Phelps declares that God and his son Jesus Christ inspire and applaud his hatred for homosexuals.

Rev. Steven Anderson, a pastor of a small Baptist church in Tempe, Arizona (why are they always Baptist preachers?) hates people who perform abortions as well as those who have them. In fact, Rev. Anderson hates the President of the United States because he has not outlawed abortions. Rev. Anderson has expressed his hatred for the President in numerous sermons and has gone as far as to say that he hopes the President will get a brain tumor like Ted Kennedy and die. Spewing his hatred to even greater degrees, Rev. Anderson has declared that God and Jesus hate President Obama with such passion, they would not see the assassination of the President as murder but as an applaudable act of righteousness.

Maybe Reverends Phelps and Anderson are missing the book of Matthew from their Bibles. I don't see how Jesus could have been any clearer. He said, "You have heard it said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder" and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "you fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire."

It would be easy to condemn the purveyors of hate in our society and walk away from this text feeling self-righteous for not being as bad as they are. Just because we match up with well with the antics of extremists, however, doesn't me we are following the ways of Christ. We might manage our sexuality better than Paris Hilton, but that doesn't mean we are treating our bodies as the temple of God. Forbes magazine reports that in the last two years, Russian oil baron, Roman Abramovich has spent over 700 million dollars on two 300 foot yachts and a Boeing 767 jet. Abramovich remodeled the jet to include a dining room for thirty and a full kitchen with gold-plated sinks. All of us can say, "well I don't spend money like that," but that doesn't mean we are good stewards of our material resources.

Hopefully, each of us can say "I don't hate like Reverend Phelps or Rev. Anderson" but that doesn't mean we are dealing with our animosity as Jesus taught. Christ didn't call us to simply be better than the worst hate mongers among us, he called us to be agents of reconciliation.

As with all sin, if we want to do better, we must first admit that we harbor ill will toward others in our hearts. In Walker Percy's novel, The Last Gentleman, a recent convert to Christianity tells his friend, "That's what I don't understand, you know: that I believe the whole business; God, the Jews, Christ, the Church, grace, and the forgiveness of sins—and yet I'm meaner than

ever. Christ is my Lord and I love him but I'm a good hater and you know what He said about that. I still hope my enemies fry in hell. What do I do about that?"

What do we do about that? Jesus teaches us three different responses to hatred depending on who it is that has lit the fire of hostility in our soul. The closer relationship we have with the person who has inflamed our hatred, the more investment Jesus requires on our part. Conversely, the more the distant the person is from us, the more minimal is the Lord's expectation.

One response Jesus taught is for people far outside our circle of relationships who do things which hurt us. Jesus addresses this problem in Matthew 5:43: "you have heard it said, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'"

Osama Bin Laden and his merchants of terror are my enemies. Notice Jesus did not say, "you shall not have enemies." He knew that in this world, enemies arise. Yet Jesus forbid us from hating even those who take innocent life and threaten our survival. Instead, Christ said, pray for those who persecute you and choose to love them. By loving our enemies, Jesus did not mean we should let them off the hook for their atrocities or fail to protect ourselves from their murderous acts. He meant we should pray that they will allow God to change their hearts and fill them with pure love. Rather than seethe with hatred for them, which, by the way, does nothing more than feed their violence and give us ulcers, Jesus taught us to pray that they will be transformed by the love of God.

I will more than likely never meet Osama Bin Laden much less have a relationship with him. Therefore Jesus does not ask anymore of me than to pray that God will somehow, make a new person out of him.

I am not a homosexual nor have I ever performed an abortion nor am I the President of the United States, yet I feel persecuted by Fred Phelps and Steven Anderson. They claim to follow the same Lord that I do and even bear the same denominational name that I do, I feel assaulted by their repugnant statements. Yet, again, I will more than likely never make their acquaintance. My choice is to let them raise my blood pressure to a boiling point, or simply pray that God will change their hearts. Jesus said don't hate, love your enemies enough to pray that God fills their hearts with love.

The second response Jesus taught pertains to those outside the church with whom we have troubled relationships. The Lord does not address the issue of who is at fault in these hostile relationships. He doesn't ascribe one set of actions for when we are in the wrong and another for when we believe the other person has caused the conflict. Either way his prescription is the same. Jesus said, "go to the person who accuses you of wrongdoing and try to come to terms with him or her before your grievances are thrown into court."

Come to terms means, try to find some way to end the hostility. This is a very practical piece of advice. Jesus is not saying to seek deep reconciliation or perfect harmony. The reason he does not advocate for such noble goals is because he knows that when we are working with people who do not share our faith in God and love for Christ, deep reconciliation is not possible. We don't have a bond strong enough to make us brothers and sisters in the deepest sense of those words. We can, however, seek to find a way to resolve our differences.

Certainly if we are guilty of some hurtful behavior, we need to confess it, seek the forgiveness of the other party and do what we can to repair the injury. Many of our disputes, however, are muddier than that. Often, both we and the other party feel we have suffered some injustice. In those cases, Jesus said, negotiate, compromise, work something out that may not be perfect for either party but will put an end to the conflict before things get out of hand and end up in court.

Years ago, when I became the pastor of a small rural church in Oklahoma, I met a delightful elder of the church. When I commented to another member about my high regard for the older man, the member said, "yeah, he's a great guy as

long as you don't mention the name of his neighbor. He's been angry with him for decades and will blow up at the mere mention of the man's name."

I was young and idealistic back in those days, so I disregarded the very good advice I was given and made a home visit to the man. The visit was very cordial and, feeling like I had built a good rapport with the saint, I asked why he would not speak to his neighbor. Our warm conversation turned icy. The good member ordered me out of his house. I later discovered that the two neighbors had refused to speak to each other for over forty years because of a dispute they had over five feet of land. Think of the years of indigestion, high blood pressure and headaches those two men suffered over their lifetimes simply because they would not compromise and settle their dispute. Jesus would say, quit worrying about who is right and who is wrong. Each of you give up two and a half feet and get on with your lives.

Lastly, Jesus offers a response to guide us when we suffer a broken relationship with another believer. Jesus said, If you are making your offering to God and realize that your brother or sister has something against you, prioritize efforts to be reconciled with that person and then make your offering to God.

Again, notice Jesus does not give separate directions for when someone is justified in their hard feelings toward us and when they are not. He said that when we become aware that another Christian has a complaint against us, we are to take the initiative and seek reconciliation.

In Matthew, chapter 18, Jesus acknowledges that sometimes we need the help of the church to resolve such differences. He teaches that if we cannot achieve reconciliation one on one, we should take a trusted and respected friend in the faith to help us work through the problem. If that doesn't work, then we might need the whole congregation to help bring reconciliation.

The goal of this process, unlike in the first two situations, is for wholehearted forgiveness and restoration of our relationship. Jesus said this is achievable because both we and the estranged party share a common faith in God and love for Christ as Lord. We have the resources of the Holy Spirit, the teachings of Jesus and the wisdom of the church to guide us. With such powerful tools, we should be able to talk through our conflicts, confess our part in the dispute, offer and request complete forgiveness and follow a plan of restoration that will bring complete reconciliation.

Sadly, even those of us in the body of Christ, tend to harbor our grudges, bury our bitterness and avoid the person with whom we have a problem. Instead of going to the one who has hurt us, we go to everyone else and ratchet up the animosity to new levels. This is not the way Jesus wants us to respond to the injuries that occur in our ongoing relationships with other disciples.

Pray for those who persecute you from a distance. Come to terms with those with whom you share a relationship but not the bond of Christ. Reconcile completely with those who share your love for Christ. This is how we become agents of reconciliation in a world where hate is extolled a virtue.