

## Taking Him Seriously

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

September 12, 2010, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

**Leviticus 24:10-23**

**Matthew 5, selected verses**

*“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you....”*

Were I in that number of disciples on the mountain long ago, listening to the words of Jesus with my own ears, I think I no more would have known how to take him then, than I know how to take him now: “Not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees...whoever is angry, whoever insults will be liable to judgment...everyone who looks lustfully...everyone who divorces...pluck out your eye, cut off your hand, do not resist, give to him who begs, do not refuse him who would borrow...be ye perfect!” How are we to take him? I think of A. J. Jacobs’ quest to follow the Bible as literally as possible in his year of living biblically. “To obey the ten commandments...be fruitful and multiply...love my neighbor...tithe my income. But also,” he writes, “to abide by the oft-neglected rules: to avoid wearing clothes made of mixed fibers. To stone adulterers. To leave the edges of my beard unshaven.” To cut off my hand. To pluck out my eye. How does that old, old hymn go? “If our love were but more simple, we should take him at his word, and our lives would be all sunshine in the sweetness of our Lord.” Really? But if not *at his word*, how should we take him?

Said Harry Emerson Fosdick in a time when fundamentalism was sweeping the nation, “He intended his words to be taken seriously--but not literally.” Seriously, but not literally. Fosdick, you will remember, was in the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church New York when he preached the sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” The sermon plunged him into a battle between the liberals and the literalists of the twenties, a battle that eventually resulted in his taking leave of the pulpit of First Church rather than subjecting himself to the doctrinal discipline of the General Assembly by way of Williams Jennings Bryant. Of his times he said, “The modernists were tempted to make a supine surrender to prevalent cultural ideas, accepting them wholesale, and using them as the authoritarian standard by which to judge the truth or falsity of classical Christian affirmations. The reactionaries, sensing the peril in this shift of authority, were tempted to retreat into hidebound obscurantism, denying the discoveries of science, and insisting on the literal acceptance of every Biblical idea, which even Christians of the ancient church had avoided by means of allegorical interpretation.”

As the nation debates the building of an Islamic community center two blocks from Ground Zero as well as what to do with the First Amendment rights of a mentally unbalanced preacher whose threat to burn the Quran has gone viral, Christians would do well to ask anew what it would mean for us to take Jesus seriously. Therefore let us listen to him again, this time taking our cues not so much from our supine surrender to cultural values, but from within the claims and context of those who first heard him.

In a word, their context was tribal: Israel was a confederation of disparate tribes living among other tribes whose volatile relationships were historically checked as well as provoked by what each defined as the tribe’s “honor.” Needless to say, little has changed in four thousand years! According to a book by the same name, *Honor*:

*A History* by James Bowman, honor in these nomadic tribes meant “the respect of the local ‘honor group’—the family, the extended clan, the tribe, the religious sect. [I woke to hear someone from the House of Lords saying this morning that what we call religious conflict is not about faith but about the group.] Group honor involved maintaining a reputation for courage and loyalty, not being charitable to enemy civilians.... ‘The honor system in Arab culture,’” Bowman writes, “‘is the default honor system, the one you see in street gangs in America—you dis me, I shoot you.’” As we all know, the “eye for an eye” code in Leviticus must therefore be read as an enlightened and radical improvement upon the way things were in the wilderness.

Yet even more radical are the words of Jesus, words that give us a glimpse of the kingdom at a time when the behavior of so-called civilized nations and peoples resembles the honor code of tribes more and more each day. To mention one word, Jesus’ command on the mount in Matthew, where he rang the changes on the law given to Moses atop another mountain, is that we love the enemy. The command presupposes, in a word, the honor of the one living God [in contrast to the tribal gods] conferred no less on the other tribe than on our tribe. Baruch Spinoza said the same some 350 years ago and was excommunicated for the effort from the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam. “Spinoza argued that no group or religion could rightly claim infallible knowledge of the Creator’s partiality to its beliefs and ways. After the excommunication,” writes philosopher Rebecca Newberger Goldstein “he spent the rest of his life studying the varieties of religious intolerance...the powerful tendency in each of us toward developing a view of the truth that favors the circumstances into which we happen to have been born.”

The radical counterclaim of the biblical witness, a claim missed by readers who believe more in religion and tribe than in the Living God, insists that honor is a gift of God, a reflection of God’s glory falling upon each and every human being ever born, according to Karl Barth. “[Honor therefore] cannot be lost. It belongs to the *character indelebilis* of [each person’s] human existence. Honor is not overlooked, forgotten, nor misunderstood by God, not even where a [person] tramples it underfoot, or where it is trampled under the feet of others.” To be sure we can sin against our own honor [turn and distance ourselves from God’s call and command] or we can dishonor the honor of another [turn and distance ourselves from God’s call and command of the other] but the honor remains constant. Hence far from grasping or holding exclusively to God’s honor as a possession to defend, we may only receive it as a gift in “pure thankfulness, in the deepest humility and in free humour.” [Notice the absence of humility and humor in fundamentalism!]

So even though the enemy is a creature who may be against us and appear to be (from our vantage point) against God, the enemy bears the indelible mark of God’s honor no less than you do or I do. Love your enemies, says Jesus whose life and death revealed love as an action rather than an emotion, as a self-giving rather than a self-securing, as a dying to self and living to God. In this utilitarian age, we must be careful to note that this is not a non-violent strategy for winning the enemy’s heart and mind; it is not a means to the end of disarming the other morally or even converting the enemy to our enlightened perspective. Love has no motive other than regard for the other; love has no expectation of the other in return; and love never quits.

Then in the second place, Jesus’ words offer concrete help in obeying this command that is so contrary to the human code of honor in the wilderness: pray for those who persecute you, Jesus says. “Praying for enemies,” notes New Testament scholar Douglas Hare, “involves a serious attempt to see them from God’s point of view.” No doubt Islamic fundamentalists see us as infidels from the point of view of God’s

Jihad, but the claim of the God revealed in Jesus Christ is clean contrary to this and, I bet, the Koran as interpreted by mainline Moslems is clean contrary to their own fundamentalists too. For us, the other is one for whom Jesus died, no exceptions, none left out. "We cannot earnestly pray for enemies without acknowledging our common humanity; they too have been created in the image of God," says Hare, "and no behavior, no matter how nefarious, can erase that image.... Besides, we cannot pray fervently for our enemies without reminding ourselves that the God who is able to love us despite our disobedience is able to love also those who hate us."

Barth puts the matter another way. This indelible honor is the honor both of being given life and of being called into service by God. Alongside our common humanity, Barth emphasizes our common call to God's service, noting that it is "in service that two [human beings] learn to know and respect one another, not by simply observing or thinking about one another, or even by living with one another, however great their concord or even friendship.... The honor of two [human beings] is disclosed and will be apparent to both when they meet each other in the knowledge that they are both claimed... for and by the service [the witness] which God has laid upon them."

In this regard, my eyes strain to see the beachheads of such prayer and service that seem so insignificant in relation to the hatred and divisions on every side, beachheads that, nevertheless, help us imagine what it might look like to obey Christ's command: the Seeds of Peace in Maine where Palestinian and Israeli children spend the summer knowing one another inside out; Corrymeela in Northern Ireland where Protestant and Catholic youth and adults have retreated for decades only to return to the front chastened and changed by one another's humanity; work camps comprised of black and white, rich and poor, northerner and southerner rebuilding burned churches or blighted city blocks; the House of Hope on the West Bank of Palestine where Christian, Muslim and Jewish grade-schoolers learn the things that make for peace. Or take the story this week that made no headlines, the story of a church in Memphis, Tennessee that put out a banner welcoming their neighbors who were moving into the mosque next door! "It will be very small indeed," says Barth of such gestures. "It will be only a very modest extolling of [God's glory], perhaps in the pious ejaculation of a prayer, perhaps in the simple reaching out of a hand to the neighbor, perhaps only in a small exercise of humility, sobriety or courage...."

In these things, I hold no illusion about the behavior of nations, nations being the judgment of God upon our choice to trust them more than God. But I would take seriously the one who spoke that day to a crowd on the mountain and is speaking still to you and to me. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, Jesus says, so that you may be children of God. Not exclusively, not over and against those who do not hear God's address as we do, not for the sake of our own private salvation. Rather the biblical claim made absurd by the claim of power politics is that in loving the enemy we show forth the nature of the Holy One who makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

"We liberals in religion," concluded Fosdick, "who have specialized in stating Christianity so that it would be simple to accept, and who have accomplished in large part our negative task of sloughing off incredibilities, should turn now in a new direction--toward the immensity, difficulty, and venturesomeness of this high faith which stakes its life on God...." May we take that turn in the year ahead as together we seek to take the demands of a love [that will not let us be] and the perfection of a love [that will not let us go] seriously!

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