

Love Your Enemies?
by Ellen Williams Hensle 3/30/25

When was the last time you prayed for God to strike down your enemies? Have you *ever* prayed for God to strike down your enemies? It's ok if you have. The ancient poets who wrote the psalms did it all the time. But I don't know many modern folks who engage in this form of prayer regularly, at least not in public. Our psalm for today does not appear in the 3-year lectionary cycle of assigned readings for Sundays, or even the version of the lectionary that provides a reading for every day of the year. After all, Jesus told us we're supposed to love our enemies, not pray for God to break their arms. But that's exactly where Psalm 10 takes us.

The psalmist begins by pleading with God – why do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? We need you here, God; why won't you show up? And then the psalmist launches into a description of the problems that require God's attention. You see, the wicked are after the poor. These wicked ones, they seem to be without heart, without empathy. They are greedy for gain; they speak in lies; they are intent on oppressing. They watch for the helpless; they lurk about to see who they can catch in their snares. Worst of all, they seem to have no fear of God. They think they can get away with anything, that God either isn't paying attention or won't bother to respond.

And so the psalmist calls on God to do just that – to take notice, to come near. And not just to start paying attention, not just to offer comfort, but to bring justice. The psalmist asks God to rise up against the wicked ones, to break their oppressive power over the poor. Maybe not literally to break their arms but to cut off their influence in the world, to pursue them until their wickedness is banished from the earth. And the psalmist states his confidence that God is the God of the helpless, the one who comes to the aid of the orphan and the oppressed; the one who hears and sees and gives strength to those who have been brought low by the evil deeds of the powerful.

For that reason, Psalm 10 is sometimes considered a psalm of thanksgiving, though its first thirteen or so verses read more like a psalm of lament or a cursing psalm. But despite the wickedness the psalmist sees running amok in the world around him, he is sure of God's goodness. He is convinced that God will act on behalf of the poor. He gives thanks in advance for what he knows God will do to break the cycle of violence and oppression and bring justice to those who need it. And he is not afraid to tell God to hurry up and get involved; or as they say in Texas, get after it already!

That's a pretty faithful prayer. Asking God to strike down our enemies may not at first blush feel like loving them the way Jesus taught us to, but in the case of this particular psalm, the psalmist is aligning himself with the poor in the struggle against oppression. Though many psalms against enemies deal with a psalmist's personal enemies, it's not immediately clear how the author of Psalm 10 is positioned, whether he considers himself among those who are being trapped by the wicked and ensnared by their lies. But regardless of whether the actions of wicked affect him personally or not, he looks around and is concerned for the welfare of the afflicted. He knows with perfect clarity that the God of justice would not want them to be treated this way. And so he asks God to come and be God, to release suffering people from the conditions that cause their suffering.

In her book *Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through the Psalms*, American Benedictine nun and student of the psalms Irene Nowell encourages us to get more comfortable praying the psalms that include prayers against our enemies. "I am convinced that refusing to pray the psalms of lament is a refusal to pray in the voice of the poor, to give voice to the voiceless sufferers," she writes. When we pray Psalm 10, we are reminded of the pain of those around us and God's promises ringing throughout Scripture, to lift up the lowly and help the oppressed. As the psalmist says, "God, you have been the helper of the orphan." Nowell thinks that a good place to start practicing dealing with our enemies in prayer is to take the newspaper in one hand and the psalm book in the other: "we have a responsibility to bring to God the pain and anger of those who suffer along with our own feelings," Nowell says.

As I read Psalm 10 throughout this week, I couldn't help thinking of the video of the Turkish PhD student at Tufts University being arrested by plainclothes Department of Homeland Security agents in front of her apartment in Somerville, Massachusetts. In the home security video, Romeysa Ozturk walks out the door with her backpack on, and what at first seems like a handful of unconnected folks hanging around the street on a spring day becomes a group of masked officers standing around Ozturk, asking her to take off her backpack and cuffing her hands as she cries out in surprise and anxiety.

"It's ok, we're the police," they tell her. "You don't look like the police," says a guy walking by with his dog. The officers lead Ozturk to an unmarked car and put her inside.

Ozturk has not been charged with a crime. A statement from the Department of Homeland Security said that her visa was revoked because she engaged in activities supporting Hamas, but they provided no evidence of this claim. The only political activity that has thus far been connected to Ozturk is an op-ed she co-authored in the Tufts student newspaper, calling on the university to review its investments in light of the ongoing violence in Gaza and divest from companies tied to Israel. It seems the psychology student has been arrested and sent to an ICE detention facility in Louisiana, without her university's involvement and against a judge's order that she remain in Massachusetts, for exercising her right to free speech.

And so we pray, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? The eyes of the wicked stealthily watch for the helpless; they lurk in secret like a lion in its den; they lurk that they may seize the vulnerable and drag them off in their net. They think in their heart, 'God has forgotten; he has hidden his face; he will never see it.' Rise up, O Lord! Lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed. Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none!" We call out the suffering we see to God, and we ask God to bring justice to God's people.

Now: a few cautions around praying against our enemies. As Anne Lamott reminds us in her classic book *Bird by Bird*, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." We're not offering prayer against our enemies the right way if we're using it to bolster our own sense of righteousness, to convince ourselves that all our personal causes are just and God is on our side about everything. Rather, as we pray these psalms, we name our pain and the pain of the world around us and entrust our suffering to a God who cares about everything God has made.

And when we ask God to strike down our enemies, we're curtailing our desire to take revenge ourselves. We're putting the ball in God's court, or the sword in God's hand, as the case may be. We're placing the situation in the hands of God, our judge and redeemer, the one who brings justice and also the one who gives mercy in abundance. And we know from Scripture that there are many cases when what human beings want is punishment, and what God offers instead is forgiveness.

Take the case of Jonah. God tells him to go to Nineveh and tell the people there to repent and turn to God, or else be destroyed. Jonah doesn't want to take this message, because he doesn't want to give his people's enemies the opportunity for salvation. He would rather God take them all out. So he goes the opposite direction from Nineveh and gets swallowed by a big fish. Finally he gets rerouted to his original destination, shares God's message, and the people there accept it. Nineveh is saved, but Jonah goes off in a huff. When we ask God to strike down our enemies, we have to be prepared for God to offer them transformative mercy instead.

After all, transformative mercy is what we want for ourselves, right? Biblical theologian Ellen Davis says that when we're not in the mood to pray the cursing psalms against our enemies, we might turn them around 180 degrees and think about whether anyone would want to pray these psalms against us. How do we in our privilege participate in the oppression of the poor? How might God, in God's transformative mercy, be inviting us to turn from sin and toward our neighbors?

Earlier I mentioned PCCH's commitment to be a Matthew 25 congregation. One of the three focus areas of that commitment is quote, "eradicating systemic poverty by addressing the root causes of economic inequality and providing support to those in need. Through advocacy, service, and partnership, we work to create just systems and opportunities for all people to thrive." Which reminds us of a third way of being that isn't really covered by Psalm 10. In this psalm, we pray in solidarity with the poor and suffering, and we ask God to bring justice.

But God is also always inviting us, God's people, to be God's partners in creating a more just world, a world where all have what they need to thrive. Leaving the revenge to God doesn't mean we don't act – not at all. In prayer, we align ourselves with God's desire for a world where people treat each other fairly, speak the truth in love, share their resources generously, and lift one another up. And then, with the Spirit's help, we go out and join God in building that world, until the whole human family comes together in peace, as equals, to share a meal around God's table of grace.

Let's get after it, shall we?