

*They tried to bury us.
They didn't know we were seeds.*
Dinos Christopoulos, 1978

Last week I promised you I would preach about loving your enemies. Little did I know what a wild ride it would be.

Enemies may be one of the hottest topics in the Bible. Hardly a psalm is sung that doesn't mention them: "You lay a table before me in the presence of my enemies," or today's psalm, "Do not fret yourself because of evildoers; do not be jealous of those who do wrong." Our Holy Bible is a chronicle of that old Chinese curse 'may you live in interesting times.' All times in the Bible are interesting as it tells a tale of wandering, encounters with threat, the rise and fall of kings and empires, endless wars for plunder, enmities, swords, fear, blood, the longing for vindication, a great cry for help. I lift my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come? Indeed, all this violence and fear are so normal in the Bible, it's easy to think that God approves of them, but I'm not sure God does.

That's because Jesus arrives to tell us "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." "Love your enemies." You can imagine how shocking that must have sounded at the time. It still does.

Those famous lines from Micah suddenly come to mind:

What does the Lord require of me

But to love mercy and do justice

And walk humbly with my God.

That's a long way from asking God to lead my troops into battle, but it's in the same Bible. Jesus concludes his teaching on loving enemies with this: We are to love them because

God loves them: “he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked??? What’s that all about? Am I to love my enemies because God loves them? How can God possibly love THAT PERSON? (You fill in the blanks.)

And what, since we’re thinking about this, is an enemy anyway? Are they always the same? Consider a midwestern farmer, a black pastor, a tool and die maker in Pennsylvania, a curandera in Arizona, a Latino contractor in Santa Rosa, a Miwok artist on Tomales Bay. What is their definition of a threat? Is it the same as mine?

Turns out it might not be. I had yet one more Road to Damascus moment when Black pastor Otis Moss III said of white liberals in a recent podcast, “White Liberals may not like what’s going on, but they still live in the mythos of empire. We Black people don’t.”

My mind literally stopped dead in its tracks. Of course I have a stake in the empire. It’s given me all that I have. I can get a traffic ticket without worrying that someone will kill me. I can walk in the neighborhood without anyone calling the police. I doubt that ICE will show up at the door or that the National Park Service will kick me out of my house to make room for a national park. I have clean water at a fair price. I’ve never had to worry that my job will be relocated to Mexico.

Simply to be part of the dominating class, even if you’re the nicest person on earth, is to be benefitted by things we’d rather not think about. It’s like what Bill W. says about alcohol: I have no control over it. I’m in it. I depend on it. I’m afraid of losing it. I need a higher power.

For most of my life, I’ve been the poor girl in the land of the very rich. It’s all relative of course because by the standards of the world I’ve never been anything but rich, but you know

how things can be in affluent neighborhoods. One day when I was feeling particularly discouraged, I said to God, “Why do the rich always get away with it, while I have to work on my attitude?”

And God said, “Sell all that you have and give to the poor. Then come, follow me.”

Jesus preached during the Golden Age of the Roman Empire. Unlike me, his disciples did not live in the mythos of empire. They could not retire to their little farm on a Greek island when life got just too stressful, and their lives were always stressful. Empire had stripped them of their historic dignity, the security of feeling chosen, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people who brought Pharaoh to his knees. Under Roman rule none of that mattered, unless, like the Sadducees, they sold out to it. The Romans loved diversity, but only on their terms.

Be merciful, says Jesus, just as your heavenly father is merciful.

Changing the subject, as one of my favorite TV characters said, “There's a dark side to each and every human soul. We wish we were Obi-Wan Kenobi, and for the most part we are, but there's a little Darth Vader in all of us. Thing is, this ain't no either-or proposition. We're talking about dialectics, the good and the bad merging into us. You can run but you can't hide. My experience? Face the darkness. Stare it down. Own it. As brother Nietzsche said, being human is a complicated gig. So give that ol' dark night of the soul a hug. Howl the eternal yes!”

That eternal “yes” is love. The world in which we live is fearfully and wonderfully made, a collage of cultures and wisdom and music, myths, magic, and surprise. Love brings what is unlike together and creates something stronger and truer than either side could achieve alone. Power wants to level all that into uniformity, while Jesus, the absolutely most radical person in the Bible, calls us out of our houses to love the differences. He may be the only great religious teacher to have included women in his inner circle. He healed the hated Romans and Samaritans.

He reminded us that in his father's house are many mansions. His disciple Philip baptized an Ethiopian court figure, and Peter baptized a centurion's family. To love our cultural diversity is to grow a flourishing ecosystem of wisdom. To learn from one another. To grow strong with love. Love raises up what is best in us and gently checks what is worst.

When I was newly ordained, I had the incredible gift of pastoring at one of the few truly diverse churches in this country. (Only 5% are.) St. Paul's Oakland was a wonderful mix of Renaissance music and spirituals. A church of activists which produced national leaders. A place which blessed and nurtured same sex love and families. In that church, I met sides of myself I didn't even know I had. We had a strong African contingent from Nigeria and Liberia and Ethiopia. They gave parties and we danced into the night.

We may have been diverse, but we were also strong and opinionated, and when the vestry voted to make St. Paul's an Oasis Community, the Africans, who believed same sex anything was an abomination, were outraged that we were going to raise that up as a core mission. I happened to be the temporary rector at the time, and I was devastated. How could I choose between my beloved LGBTQ friends and my equally beloved African friends? I wasn't going to do the liberal patronizing thing either, which treats people who disagree with you as somehow ignorant, to be tolerated until they see the light, which essentially means, until they grow up and see the world my way. (There's that mythos of empire again, that my way is always the right way.)

I threw up my hands. I asked Jesus, what would you do? And Jesus said, as you'd expect, Give a dinner party. So I invited the leaders of both communities to join me for dinner in the parish hall for no other purpose than to get to know one another. No agenda. Just food and drink

and a convivial evening. They told their stories. We laughed. I didn't say a lot, just glowed with my love for everyone at that table.

The next day Emeke called me and said, "We're with you. We can't keep anybody out of church," and St. Paul's became an Oasis congregation with everyone's true and willing support. It wasn't a matter of political correctness. It was an act of love. And new friendships were made.

Sometimes situations are not so loveable, but it's the same principle. Look for common threads. We're all human. We all laugh. True laughter from the heart is like the burning bush. It lights up the world without consuming it.

Jesus' commandment that we love one another no matter what, the commandment we bow down to every Maundy Thursday when we wash each other's feet, promises that if we can love one another, if most of us can do that, and really do that, that is what will save us, for when we love, God can work through us and in the process make our enemies loveable because God loves everyone very very much, even when we don't, and in that way, we make the world whole. Amen.