



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, July 4, 2010
Independence Day

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Deuteronomy 10:17-21 and
Matthew 5:43-48

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HATING (AND LOVING) ENEMIES

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” When we hear this gospel by itself, we may think Jesus is correcting a false interpretation of the Old Testament that had crept into the customary religious teaching of his time. You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say (Jesus then correcting the erroneous reading), Love your enemies. It is easy to find places in the Old Testament where love of neighbor is commanded. Israel is supposed to care for the stranger, the sojourner, the foreigner, remembering that she herself was a stranger and sojourner in Egypt. So from today’s reading from Deuteronomy. Likewise Leviticus: Love your neighbor as yourself. But does the Old Testament also command that the enemy be hated? And if so, what is the point of hating the enemy?

The context of today’s gospel is the Sermon on the Mount where it caps off a series of so-called antitheses: teachings of Jesus’ each of which has the form, “You have heard that it was said, but I say to you.” In each of the five preceding cases, Jesus takes what is a clear Old Testament teaching and extends it to a new and transforming reach. You have heard that it was said, “You shall not kill,” but I say, Do not be angry. You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery,” but I say, Do not look at a woman lustfully. And so forth: instead of divorce by a routine certificate, Jesus makes it much harder for a man to leave his wife. Instead of a prohibition on swearing falsely, Jesus says to put away all swearing whatsoever. Even when Jesus invokes “an eye for an eye,” we need to remember that that was a legal provision to *limit* retaliation, something that forbade escalation (so that you could not say, you took my eye, so I’ll take out *both* of yours, or perhaps your eyes and your children as well, etc.). But Jesus picks up “one eye for one eye, at most” and pushes it further: evil is not to be resisted at all. So you see, in each case Jesus takes something that is clearly in the Old Testament, and whose purpose we can understand—Do not kill, do not commit adultery, only an eye for an eye—and pushes it further. The same must be true here in the final, concluding antithesis: instead of loving your neighbor and hating your enemy, Jesus says to love your enemy.

But where and why does the Old Testament say that we should hate our enemy? There are many sayings about enemies, particularly in the Psalms. May I take you to Psalm 139? That’s a beautiful Psalm, number 139, at least until it gets to the end. It has a deep sense of how God knows us better than we know ourselves, that God is more intimate to us than even we are. “O Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me.” God knows our risings up and our goings down. He is in

front of us and behind us. However high we ascend, God is there; and even if we go down to the grave and make it our bed, God is there also. And God is in our past and our future: he knit together our inmost parts when we were still in our mother's womb, and so forth. The Psalmist articulates the wish that he knew God's thoughts. And then suddenly he becomes very hard and cruel. He asks God to slay the wicked, those who maliciously defy God. And hear the words: *Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord? And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*

I believe that what seems to us, at not only first but perhaps second and even third glance, as a sudden shift in Psalm 139, is deeply a continuation of a single thought. If we are to get into the mind of God, the God who knows us so intimately, then we will feel personally that God's enemies, the malicious ones who defy (may I say) the goodness of creation and the dignity of human beings—we will feel personally that those enemies of God are our enemies. And we will hate them: not because they were first our enemies, but because they are God's. And that hatred, the Psalmist says, is perfect.

This seems to me the best construal that we can put on "hating enemies" in the Old Testament. But stick with me: for I want to stick with Jesus, who said, *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbors and hate your enemies," but I say, Love your enemies.* What is this extension, this deepening, about? What can we make of it?

On its face, the first thing Jesus is telling us is that, although we cannot deny that God has enemies, God's relationship to his enemies is one of love. Indeed, he lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike. All the good things that God causes—the goodness of creation, the dignity of human beings—he gives to all people. And who are those people? They would be those who are truly his friends, the saints; those who want to be his friends but don't do a good job of it; those who don't care about him but are, perhaps in spite of themselves, his friends; those who think they are opposing God but in fact are on God's side nonetheless; and, yes, those who hate God and love malice. All those people—all of us—are beloved of God. So if we attain the perfection of taking God's perspective and making it our own, we will not hate anyone: we will love both neighbor and enemy.

What, you may well be wondering, does any of this have to do with Independence Day?

It gives us permission, I think, to consider in a special and loving way our own country, its ideals, its history, its accomplishments. If we think of our country as trying in a special way to be a friend of God, that is permitted, provided that we remember the necessary order of things: it is not we but God who provides the ultimate rule and the highest judgment. God takes patriotism and pushes it further. The necessary order, for anyone who would be God's friend, is for God to stand over us. Thus we may think of our country as having a special place without being required to have hatred for any other people or nation or religion or any alternative social ordering. If we have enemies, our task is to figure out how to love them. It is a task that has exercised the greatest Christian minds from Saint Augustine to our present day.

But let me also say that Jesus telling us to love our enemies is a teaching, I think first of all, not about the relationship of one government or nation or people to another, but about the relationship of us with one another as part of a single people. Independence Day celebrates, among other things, the possibility of a people being self-governing. But we cannot seriously propose to be a self-governing people if we do not love our fellow-citizens. It is a civic virtue to ascribe noble motives to one's opponents; to take an opposing argument at its strongest point, not its weakest; to encourage reflection over reaction; to be guided by law rather than private vendetta; and so forth. In such concrete ways do we love our enemies, and so move, step by small step, toward the perfection of the friends of God.

[Note: See Gundry, *Matthew*, pp 96f., for this final antithesis as a continuation of its predecessors.]