




Theme: Relationships.


Real Relationships

Weekly Memory Verse:

9 Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. – Romans 12:9

Monday, April 15 – Read **Matthew 5:43-45** and **Luke 6:27-28**. Loving our enemies begins inside of us as this is a love of choice, not feeling. As today's Scripture readings show, Jesus called for a radical love that transcends the boundaries of our own communities and relationships. It's a love that extends to those who have wronged us, challenging the "us vs. them" mentality that so easily and often divides people. It's not about condoning evil, but about defeating it with a more powerful force: love.


 How do Jesus' words in Matthew inspire you to embrace Jesus' radical form of love that reaches beyond your personal comfort? In today's polarized society, how can you actively use love to dismantle the "us vs. them" mentality and build bridges, even with personal or social "enemies"? How would you apply this idea to your personal relationships? What needs to happen inside of you to be able to love those with whom you disagree?


 Jesus said loving enemies makes us more like God, who, "makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous." What kind of growth in character and maturity does it take to love your enemies? Did Jesus mainly mean altering your emotions to feel more affectionate toward enemies, or altering your behavior to act for their good? How can you become more like Jesus as you act for the good of all?

Prayer: *God, grant me the strength to embody radical love, trusting that love is a powerful force against division and evil. Guide me to actively seek to build bridges, challenge personal prejudices, and confront injustices with a living faith that transforms my heart. Amen.*

Tuesday, April 16 – Read **Psalms 19:12-14** and **Romans 7:15-19**. From the transcript of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's sermon, "Loving Your Enemies," on Nov. 17, 1957, we read, "In order to love your enemies, you must begin by analyzing self.... we begin to love


our enemies and love those persons that hate us... by looking at ourselves." It's easy to see other people's flaws. But at the end of Psalm 19, the poet asked God to help him not just know what God wanted but put it into practice every day. The apostle Paul says in Romans that the line between good and evil cut through his own heart. Only as he put his trust in Jesus was God's powerful grace able to free him from evil's hold on his life.


 "The meditations of my heart," sounds, "spiritual," in Psalm 19. But the Hebrew term meant more than burning some incense and thinking quietly. It is implied that as we meditate and reflect on God's teaching, we put that way of life into practice, as we read also in **Deuteronomy 17:19** and **Joshua 1:8**. Have you ever said, "I've got to quit binge-watching that reality show" or "...eating so much ice cream," when you had no plans to quit? Are there parts of God's instruction you think about, but have no intention of doing right now? What is keeping you from following through?

 When Paul said evil came from "sin that lives in me," in verse 17, he wasn't ducking responsibility for his actions. It was a vivid way to describe a common human experience: the sense of an inner war, two principles of action battling for control. He did not end in despair, but with these words in Romans 7:24-25, "Who will deliver me from this dead corpse? Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" When has Christ's power acted in you, not wiping out the struggle, but helping you choose the right more often?

Prayer: *Lord God, you are my rock and my redeemer. I want those to be, not just pious "church words," but the governing reality of my life. Please strengthen me to be honest with myself and with you. Amen.*

Wednesday, April 17 – Read **Luke 7:1-10**. The words of Jesus about loving others are challenging when we realize that we also are called to see good in the other and remember that they also were made in the image of God (just like us!) Today's passage showed that bridges of understanding are possible even between enemies. Where Jesus lived, Jews and the occupying Romans were the definition of enemies. Yet local Jewish leaders cared enough about the Centurion to advocate for him to Jesus in verse 3. The Centurion loved the Jewish people and helped them build a synagogue in verse 5. The Centurion trusted in Jesus' healing power in verses 6-8. Jesus was "impressed" with the Centurion's faith and healed the servant in verses 9-10.


 Love can build bridges of understanding, even and perhaps especially with our "enemies." But that doesn't happen on its own. It takes time and intentionality. As you read about the interaction of the Roman centurion (a commander of 100 soldiers), the Jewish leaders in Capernaum, and Jesus, what steps do their story suggest that you might take today to show love for your "enemies"? How could you seek to understand them better? What needs of theirs might you meet?


 Remember that seeing good in others does not require us to say that what happened to us that was hurtful was ok. Human imperfections never excuse injustice or things that have been done to us that cause pain, but how can

seeing our own flaws help us look for the good in people who act unjustly or who hurt us?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, there were many reasons for you and your disciples to fear and hate Roman soldiers. Yet you saw the good in this Roman and healed his servant. Give me eyes like yours that look for the good. Amen.*

Thursday, April 18 – Read **Mark 15:33-39** and **2 Corinthians 5:14-17**. The stories, teaching, and miracles of Jesus point to this important truth. Agape, the kind of love that chooses to do the loving thing even when it's hard, has within it a redemptive power. There is a power in the love Jesus calls us to that can eventually transform us and others. Jesus looks out at the Roman Empire with its powerful and intricate military machinery and, in essence says, "I will not use this method. Neither will I hate the Roman Empire. I am just going to use love as my ammunition." He would literally say, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." About Mark's account of Jesus' death, scholar Craig Evans said, "The Roman centurion confesses... Caesar is not the 'son of God'; Jesus the crucified Messiah is.... In calling Jesus the Son of God, the centurion has switched his allegiance from Caesar, the official 'son of God,' to Jesus, the real Son of God." In 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul said humanity's deepest spiritual issue is alienation from God. The good news, he said, is that God's love in Christ can overcome our alienation.


 Scholar N. T. Wright wrote in his commentary, *Mark for Everyone*, "A battle-hardened Roman thug, used to killing humans the way one might kill flies, stands before this dying young Jew, and says something which, in Mark's mind, sends a signal to the whole world.... The Roman centurion becomes the first sane human being in Mark's gospel to call Jesus God's son and mean it." What might have moved that centurion to see Jesus not as a Jewish enemy but God's son? What moves you to believe and testify to that same truth?


 The Message version of the Bible paraphrases 2 Corinthians 5:21 as, "We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you." Do you picture God as uninterested and distant, as angry, and eager to punish, or as lovingly eager to bridge the distance to all human beings (including you)? How has your reconciliation with God made you, "a new creature in Christ"? Who do you know who needs to hear that good news, quite possibly from you?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, keep my eyes open to see what the Roman centurion saw on that grim hillside outside Jerusalem. As I become more whole in your love, help me to see each person as your precious child. Amen.*

Friday, April 19 – Read **Luke 19:41-44** and **Matthew 26:51-52**. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, as Luke 19 reported, it was not just a generic "spiritual" issue that broke his heart. Some Jewish religious leaders were advocating teachings that would soon lead to a failed revolt against Rome and massive suffering in AD 66–70, about 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. That widespread attitude was hiding, "the things that lead to peace." Jesus' response to Peter in the garden carried the same message: force and hatred triggers more force and hatred. This is true in our personal


relationships, as well as between countries or cultures. The love that Jesus asks us to live out changes both party's hearts.

 Hatred and hurt most often leads to more hatred and hurt. Have you, or someone you cared about, ever had to try to stop a “descending spiral” of anger and hatred? How have you done that? Next time this happens, can you learn to be quiet and count to 10 in your head before responding? Can you save that email or text written in a moment of anger and re-read it later before you hit send? Do you think that will change your relationships?

 Peter tried a typical armed response to those arresting Jesus in the story from Matthew's gospel. Jesus said much more force was available than Peter's one sword. Jesus consistently resists the use of force as a sign of the kingdom, as we read about also in Matthew 10:7–10 and Luke 22:49–51. Do you think Jesus told Peter to put the sword away because he felt helpless, or because he knew his self-giving love was the path to victory, not defeat? What does Jesus' response teach us about how we might respond in our difficult relationships?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, we sometimes picture you as weak and inoffensive. Remind me that you and your example changed the world so much more powerfully than all those Roman swords and swordsmen. Amen.*

Saturday, April 20 – Read **Matthew 26:47-50** and **Luke 23:32-34**. In the dark of night, an armed crowd came to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. Leading them was Judas, “one of the Twelve.” He chose a bizarre signal: “Arrest the man I kiss.” Yet the first word Jesus spoke to him was “friend.” As scholar N. T. Wright put it, “It is of course the word ‘friend’ that causes us to catch our breath. Friendship, for Jesus, does not stop with betrayal, even though now it is tinged with deep sadness.” Later that same day, Jesus prayed, not for himself, but for Roman soldiers nailing him to the cross.

 How often on the news or talk shows do you hear love, especially toward enemies, spoken of as “strong and powerful”? Yet in **Acts 7:59- 60**, we see Stephen, an early Jesus follower, showing how Jesus' model injected the ability to love enemies into his heart: “As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, accept my life!’ Falling to his knees, he shouted, ‘Lord, don't hold this sin against them!’ Then he died.” Thankfully, most of us do not have enemies trying to kill us. In what ways, in school, a workplace, a neighborhood, or even a family, does someone treat you in ways that make them feel like an enemy? How can you allow God's love to make you strong enough to love your enemies in everyday life?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I don't like it when people hurt me or people I care about. Neither did you—yet you conquered those evil actions, not by lashing back, but by using the mysterious power of love. Inject that strong, powerful element more fully into my life. Amen.*