

Talking with the enemy: Learning patience, developing habits

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

In Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, Jayber is a barber in Port William, Kentucky, who interacts with a variety of people as they come to his barbershop. He struggles to get along with Troy Chatham, an acquisitive agribusinessman whom Jayber thinks is destroying the land in their county. To make matters worse, Troy has married Mattie, the woman whom Jayber has secretly admired for several years.

It is the late 1960s, and divisions in America over civil rights and the Vietnam war have emerged in Port William. Troy is a fierce supporter of the U.S. government's policies, including the war. One evening in the barbershop, Troy starts talking about how much he hates the war protesters.

"They ought to round up every one of them sons of bitches and put them right in front of the damned communists, and then whoever killed who, it would be all to the good."

There was a little pause after that. Nobody wanted to try to top it. . . .

It was hard to do, but I quit cutting hair and looked at Troy. I said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you."

Troy jerked his head up and widened his eyes at me. "Where did you get that crap?"

I said, "Jesus Christ."

And Troy said, "Oh."

It would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except that I did not love Troy.

In the past few months I have thought a lot about Jesus' injunction to "love your enemies." I thought about how issues of war and peace are shaped by reflection on the call to love our enemies, and about Jonah's haunting tale, which presses the

question of whether we really want our enemies to repent. My focus on loving enemies, along with the long tradition of just war presumptions against preemptive strikes, led me to oppose the war against Iraq. But once the war started, I began to focus on a different aspect of Jesus' injunction—the one reflected in Jayber's admission that he doesn't love Troy.

People on both sides of current debates have engaged in inexcusable behavior toward those with whom they disagree. Dale Petroskey, president of the Baseball Hall of Fame, canceled a celebration of the movie *Bull Durham* with Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins because he believed that the two actors' opposition to the war would politicize the event and somehow put U.S. troops in jeopardy. A woman on my own campus, passionately opposed to the war, accosted a military chaplain and angrily charged him with being "one of those responsible for all of the killings."

I have talked with pastors who were accused of injecting partisan politics into the church when they articulated their conviction that the decision to go to war was inconsistent with Christian convictions. But I also talked with Christians who thought the war was justified and found themselves hounded into silence by opponents who angrily derided them as American imperialists.

It is far easier to love enemies in the abstract than to love the people with whom we deal on a day-to-day basis. This is as true of those "enemies" who explicitly intend us harm as it is of those who are "enemies" because of fundamental disagreements. But it is only in those flesh-and-blood relationships with the Troys of our lives that we learn the habits and practices we need for loving our enemies. Such schooling is necessary if we are to make commitments to love enemies in ways that display moral fiber rather than empty rhetoric.

James 1:19 enjoins us, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." We are challenged to learn the patience required for loving enemies by developing a readiness to listen and a reticence to speak. This injunction does not suggest that we give up our judgments and convictions; it does require that we listen carefully to the judgments and convictions that our enemies hold. Such willingness to listen may even cause us, or our interlocutors, to modify convictions. At the very least, it will likely lead to a more respectful and meaningful disagreement, and a deeper appreciation of the costliness of loving one's enemies.

Once war has broken out, James's injunction to be slow to anger becomes more difficult, yet also more important. It does not say that we are never to be angry—only that we should be careful because of its destructive potential for ourselves and others. Anger can be a sign of life, a passion that stirs prophetic indignation. But it can also tear away at the fabric of our souls, undermine trust and fragment relationships. Some of the anger that has been directed at enemies near and far will be difficult to overcome.

There are other lessons to learn. We need to school ourselves in patterns of loving enemies day to day in matters of less dramatic controversy or wrongdoing. Only then can we shape habits that equip us to cope with more difficult issues and times. If churches are schools for learning love for strangers, friends and enemies, then we will be better prepared to produce great and small moments in the history of Christianity. Who knows, we might even learn to love Troy.