

Enemy territory: Unexpected tastes of joy

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

Although it would be easier at age 48 to take up the violin or pole-vaulting, I am tiptoeing into a long-postponed project of learning how to love my enemies. Not that I haven't talked a good game or done admirable work up to now. I appeared on TV arm in arm with a Muslim imam to calm public ire the evening of 9-11. I met often to reconcile with a man who sued my church. But aren't these so-called enemies easy to love? My real foes, upon whom I've never expended much love, are my "enemies of thought," people all around me who just think wrong.

My neighbor and I smile superficially, sip wine and chat about the weather, but I seethe at the political sign in his yard and assess him to be a numbskull. I pick up a book, sigh over its flawed reasoning and flat-footed writing, and secretly thank God "that I am not like other men." The clergy in town preach vapid, atrocious theology, wrapping themselves in the flag, firing Bible bullets at popular targets. The Bible is not a weapon!, I trumpet, along with my insistence that the most important Bible verse in the world right now is "Love your enemies."

For everybody else's enemies I am full of love. But not for *my* enemies of thought. To those who believe in violence, for example, I respond with verbal violence. Then it occurs to me: not only am I utterly inept and uninterested in loving my enemies, but my thought patterns pretty much mirror American foreign policy. I am like Donald Rumsfeld waving off the French as irrelevant or pernicious, prepared to go it alone because I am right, crushing all foes (even if only in my mind).

Most citizens, pastors and academics I know indulge in this same imperialism of thought. Not that critical thinking is evil; without our shrewd judgments we would sink into the kind of life my dog seems to appreciate. I am a critic, not just by training, but by nature. During seminary, I stored up my fiery rage and then unleashed my prophetic self on a congregation or two. But as I grow older, I grow more charitable. Nowadays I step back and examine my sumptuously informed body

of thought, and find that my critically addicted soul knows very little joy. I know how to find fault, how to be right, how to zap a foe with the clinching argument, how to marshal one more weighty footnote. But the joy gets vacuumed out of everything. I suspect my healing will come only if I can learn to love my enemies.

After he retired from serving as a rural mail carrier, my grandfather, Papa Howell, walked me to Mr. Teeter's store where he joined the other retired men of Oakboro on wooden chairs, chewed tobacco (spitting into a can perilously near my feet), argued passionately about politics, religion, society, went home at the end of the day, and came back for more the next day. These unlettered men knew much about the world and did not settle for half-baked, ingrown opinions, but tested, listened, learned—and loved. My generation does not love enemies of thought. Instead, we are “tolerant,” which falls so far short of love as to qualify for a different species altogether.

The kind of love that might be faithful to Christ, that might bring me some joy, is not that of the clergyman I know who “loves” homosexuals: he is prepared at a moment's notice, should a homosexual happen to show up, to unsheathe his scalpel of Bible verses and surgically remove this wickedness, all the while grinning with what he calls the “love of Jesus.” Seeing him reflects back to me what I wish to do to people who brandish flag magnets, support the president “no matter what,” believe the poor just need to try harder, and admire Jesus as the prince of capitalism.

Jean Vanier wrote that “to love someone is not first of all to do things for them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through our attitude, ‘You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself.’ We all know well that we can do things for others and in the process crush them, making them feel that they are incapable of doing things by themselves. To love someone is to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them.” Can we add, “even in the enemy”?

So with no prior experience, with no real expectation of success (or failure), I am beginning. When I preached on the war, I trembled a little when I noticed sitting in a pew a four-star general who wrote a book on military strategy in Iraq. I asked him to lunch, looked for beauty, noticed his capacity for life—and light shining in him. I'd crossed words with a fundamentalist minister across town, an angry dynamo who's trying to rinse sin out of our city. We ate lunch, swapped child photos, shared dreams and wounds, and I saw more beauty, more light. My neighbor and I started talking about why on earth we think what we think, and in the thicket of craziness I

got a glimpse of beauty, definite light. I can't say I have changed my position on this or that. But these fledgling lunges at love I find satisfying. I would swear I even delighted in an unexpected taste of joy just the other day. Maybe it was God saying even to me, "You are beautiful. I trust you. There is light shining in you."