February 19, Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:38–48

by Elizabeth Palmer in the February 1, 2017 issue

Love your enemies. It's easy to claim that these words are countercultural, like so much of the Sermon on the Mount. It can be theologically fruitful to highlight the beautiful paradox of love juxtaposed with hatred (the root of Jesus' word for *enemies*). And it's important, during these politically divisive days, to remind ourselves that those people whose ideas and actions seem anathema to us are still God's children.

But I have trouble dwelling in such interpretive abstractions. I keep getting stuck in the more concrete question that comes first: Who are my enemies?

Do I even have enemies? There's that neighbor whose cigarette smoke perpetually drifts into our yard, bringing malodorous chemicals to my spouse's garden and my children's lungs. Is he my enemy? I've been deeply hurt in the past by the actions of people who possess astonishingly low levels of self-awareness, humility, or restraint. Maybe those people count as my enemies?

What about people in positions of power whose white supremacist and misogynist rhetoric builds up structures that threaten vulnerable people? Do I at least get to regard them as my enemies? Or perhaps my deepest enemy is something inside of me that I'm trying to overcome, some sin or weakness that keeps me from living fully into God's desire for me.

Existential battles rage for all of us, and it's important to take a stand—as Martin Luther reminded us when he (allegedly) threw his inkwell at the devil and (actually) refused to recant before the emperor. When the eschaton comes, I'd like to be able to say that I was on the side of the good: that I advocated for those most in need, recalling God's grace through Christ and acting accordingly, especially when public rhetoric became the most hateful and harmful.

That said, I'm fairly certain that I don't have any real-life, personal enemies. Nobody has ever sued me or taken my coat or forced me to go one mile. As far as I can recall I've never been struck on the right cheek. I can see hatred unfolding around me—exponentially, it seems, these days—but I'm not in any obvious way its immediate target.

I'm equally certain that many people are not so shielded. As I write, news feeds make me aware of the unfathomably worsening situation in Syria. Hatred, murder, and the lust for power have combined in a toxic stew that threatens to drown an entire nation. The kind of enemies and persecution that Jesus names aren't a unique element of first-century politics; they are still abundant across the world. Closer to home, there are people in my congregation and neighborhood, even in my family, who could accurately name others as their personal enemies.

But at this moment I would be hard-pressed to name a tangible, immediate enemy in my own life. And this fact makes me hesitant to interpret Jesus' command for other people. I would never exalt self-sacrifice as a virtue for someone who has already sacrificed so much that she barely has a self to give. When counseling someone who has been assaulted or abused, I wouldn't dictate the terms of forgiving a perpetrator. So how can I tell someone who is a target of hatred that they are supposed to love the person who hates them?

I struggled with this question as I listened to a series of talks on race, religion, and politics at a recent conference. Kelly Brown Douglas asserted that what some people would call America's greatness is a myth of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism upheld by "the violence that traps people of color in the crucifying realities of death." Another scholar, Laura McTighe, talked about the "landscape of brutal expulsion from the contours of society" that makes people into ghosts because of their race and gender.

I know enough about mass incarceration, housing discrimination, and economic racism to have an intuitive sense of the truth behind these claims. I also know that I participate in systems that keep me free of these brutal, crucifying realities while trapping others.

Sometimes the identity of an enemy is blatantly clear. Other times it's much subtler. As I listened to these talks, I was struck with the sense that I am at the same time an advocate and an enemy to many of my sisters and brothers in Christ. I may cast my

vote against racism, and I may even throw the occasional inkwell against hatred. But I profit at the expense of others, and I do so knowingly. I am so far from the "perfect" that Jesus commands of us. I'm much closer to being the enemy that others are commanded to love.

And yet, if there is hope in Jesus' words, it may reside in that final, most difficult command: Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. The word that Jesus uses for *perfect* has teleological resonances, literally: its root word is *telos*. The perfection for which we aim is a goal, an end, a completion. It's bigger than us; it resides outside of us. We're not there yet, but we're getting closer.

That doesn't get us off the hook any more than living free of enemies means we can avoid naming ourselves as enemies. But it means that we're works in progress—and that God is the one doing the perfecting in us.

Love your enemies, and be perfect as God is perfect. These words are expansive enough to accommodate the paradox of loving amidst hate, with room enough for people who find themselves on both sides of that equation. These words are also forgiving enough that we can live into them with grace even when we repeatedly fail. They're hope as much as command, but it's the fiercest sort of hope—the kind that simultaneously loves us, interrogates us, and perfects us.