

Notes on loving your neighbor

It's easy to love Mr. C. It's not as easy to love Mrs. M., and it's stone-cold not easy to love that guy down the street.

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Love thy neighbor as thyself . . . Aw, it's easy to love Mr. C., as he's the guy who cheerfully lends his tools to everyone on the street and gives away hatfuls of fresh redolent summer-savory tomatoes. He's the kind of guy who has an extra set of tire chains in his garage for when you suddenly have to drive over the mountain to retrieve a sick kid from college, and he says ah keep 'em until spring, son—it's not like I need them. It's easy to love that guy.

It's not as easy to love Mrs. M., who is a ferocious bitter snide supercilious gossip and loves to intimate darkly that easy drugs and easier sex are rife among the teenagers in the neighborhood. But it can be done, if you just smile and grind your teeth, and consider that at least she is not heavily armed, or the governor, or in charge of the national Twitter feed.

And it's just stone-cold not easy to love the guy down the street who parks all his huge vehicles in front of everyone else's house and was caught once dumping motor oil in the creek, and who more than once has spent the night passed out cold in the moonscape of his garden. But you endure him, you say hey when you pass him in the street, and you talk a little sports, on the general theory that any flash of humanity might cool him out and maybe make him stop parking his Starfleet in front of tiny Mrs. H.'s cottage.

But what about arrogant thugs like Mr. Osama bin Laden, who murdered three of my friends 12 years ago? What about a neighbor like that? Because he was my neighbor, damn it, as much as I wish he was resident on Venus. That man roasted children on the airplanes. He fomented the murder of many thousands of his fellow Muslims. He's responsible for thousands of innocent people being blown apart and living their lives without limbs and dads and moms and brothers and sisters and daughters and sons. How can I love a preening twisted coward like that guy?

Because if I cannot even try, then I am a liar when I say I hear Christ. Because if I cannot find it in me to believe, reluctantly and furiously and disgruntled and raging against it all the way, that there was some shard of holiness even in that slime, some flash of I Am Who Am, some breath of the Unimaginable One, then to say I am Christian is a foul and whopping lie.

We say we believe that all living things are holy. We say we believe that there is the Christ in every heart—Christ in us, as St. Paul says. We say we believe that he is not dead but resident in each and every person born of woman in this bruised and blessed world—a miracle.

But if the mysterious Word is alive in every heart, then he was in some chamber of even bin Laden's, and Hitler's, and Mao's, and Stalin's, and Pol Pot's—the endless parade of thugs that fill our newspapers and smartphones and history with their shrill crowing lies.

What? Criminals! Murderers! Their souls roast in hells fired by the eternal fuel of their evil egos!

Probably. But if you and I cannot believe that God made even them, breathed his love into their hearts as infants, gave them their chance to sing and share the Gift, then we are shameful liars. That is what Christianity demands. It is about love, period. It is not about easy love. That is the revolution of it, the incredible illogical unreasonable genius of it. It is about loving those you hate and would happily imprison or execute. It is about knowing that they are your brothers and you are not at all unlike them, with murderous splinters in your own heart. It is about being honest, or at least trying to be.

Listen: it is terribly, daily, hourly, immensely difficult for me to believe that there was a shred of decency in the man who murdered my friends Tommy Crotty, Farrell Lynch and Sean Lynch. It is close to impossible—and some days it is impossible for me. But I am damn well going to try, because I don't think Mr. Jesus Christ was a liar, and I think what he said is the only thing that can save the world, and us, and my beloved children, and yours. Amen.