

“To Love the Enemy”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
Matthew 5:43-48

This weekend we celebrate the foresight and courage of our ancestors, who risked everything, sacrificed much, and fought hard, to establish a republic based upon the reality that in the eyes of God all are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Those who came before us engaged in battle with greater reluctance than we might remember, only after having exhausted every other means at their disposal, and when they finally resorted to war to win our independence, the founders of our nation did so with an understanding that the foe was formidable yet impermanent. There was no desire among most to be at perpetual enmity with Britain. This desire to be reconciled, under appropriate terms, spawned partly from enlightened self-interest but also, I believe, from a keen appreciation for the Gospel we heard today from Matthew.

We often encounter this lesson and bristle. The idea of loving our enemy offends us, especially for those who have stood in harm’s way, or perhaps worse, those who have endured the daily misery of waiting for a loved one in danger to come home safely. Apart from a rare few, none of us likes the notion of loving our enemy, as Christ commands. In fact, we frequently enjoy despising our enemy, sometimes because the mean little blankety-blanks deserve it. However, a moment’s reflection reveals the wisdom of Jesus’ instruction in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies.

You see, enmity between people is transient. Two-hundred years ago, Britain remained our enemy. For most of our lifetimes, though, America has shared a special friendship with the United Kingdom. Sixty-four years ago, after one of the most vicious conflicts in history, we conquered the Japanese Empire. Today, we are active trading partners and military allies with them. Likewise with Germany, whom we fought twice in thirty years; now we work together in harmony.

Perhaps someday, competition and incompatibility will once again render enemies out of friends and lead to violence, but if so, we would be well served to regard not only what is but also what might be, because as Christians our hope – tempered by faith – grants a vision of the possible that goes beyond ordinary limitations of human imagination and perceives with a greater God-given depth the fleeting character of enmity, for God’s peace eventually conquers all.

This is not to say that we indulge in pacifism, an ideal sadly rendered inaccessible in our sin-soaked world, but Christ’s command to love our enemies, coupled with a persistent awareness that today’s enemy could someday be our friend, ought to heighten our reluctance to use violence, so that war truly becomes the option of last resort, after all other avenues have irredeemably failed.

We also need to exercise great caution as we identify our enemies, lest our fear and anger inspires us to paint with too broad a brush. God calls us to be ever mindful of how true the famous phrase can be, “we have met the enemy and he is us.” The same sin that can make enemies out of others can also make us enemies, not only to others, but also to ourselves.

What this means for us, on this Fourth of July weekend, is that we avoid the temptation of allowing our rightful gratitude to slip into proud self-congratulation. We have a long way to go, as a people, before we begin to measure up to the best examples our founders gave us; much farther still, before we start to fulfill our true potential as a nation. It means we resist the jingoistic, xenophobic rhetoric that assumes we are always right, when such an assumption is idolatrous, because only God is always right, and as good as we are, we are not God.

On a personal level, what the command to love the enemy means is that we are to rise above the rest, not with a sense of superiority, but with a humble and grateful heart for the gift of grace from God that enables and ennobles us, so that we might exercise restraint, forgive with greater readiness, and offer kindness when cruelty might seem more fitting and feel more satisfying. This is an especially timely message as we prepare to convene The General Convention in a few days, where many of the same polarizing issues will be misrepresented by the media in a manner calculated to best attract attention and foment enmity.

However, most of all, on this day and every other, we must continually remember the persistent refrain of scripture, included in today's passage from Matthew, that God shows no partiality. Paraphrasing the prophet Isaiah, Jesus said, "[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

At first glance, this appears terribly unfair, but how good are we at being fair toward those we love most? When dealing with those we care for most deeply, our sense of justice is heavily skewed toward mercy, and the same is true of God, only in greater measure. And unlike us, who can be rather particular and frankly fickle about whom we love and how much we love them, God, as John reveals in his first letter, *is love*, which means that God loves all creation,

including mean, selfish people we deem our enemies, even us when we are mean and selfish and provoke others into declaring us their enemies.

God doesn't love the meanness or the selfishness, but those sins aren't us and aren't them, whomever we define as "them," but God never forgets who we really are, and who we can be, because God, unlike us, never forgets whose we are, as creatures created in God's image of love, as people who belong to the One who bids us peace by loving even our enemy. Amen.