



Loving our Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

Rev. Thomas G. James

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A few weeks ago, in one of our small group studies, someone expressed that this book hasn't been their favorite. They noted that Held Evans doesn't come across as the most devout in her belief, and for a book about wholehearted faith, that makes it a challenging read. And truly, in her writing, Held Evans does ask a lot of questions about scripture, about the church, and about faith. She expresses some concern and she voices some disappointment. Indeed, if you search for book reviews online, it is her skepticism that gets talked about more than anything else. The book is intentional about asking questions and pondering answers to questions that others shy away from asking.

It comes across fairly strongly in this book that Held Evans does not agree with the sentiment that we must agree on everything the pastor teaches simply because the pastor taught it. Nor does she agree that we must believe everything the church proclaims simply because the church proclaims it.

She writes about the many friends, family members, colleagues, and community neighbors who were unwelcomed in the churches she had grown up in, and how she couldn't fathom that such an unwelcoming posture was the intended expression of faith by God – the God who became in-fleshed in the person of Jesus Christ, who taught, healed, and dined with the unwelcomed, and who gave his life for the salvation of all. She couldn't fathom that such a posture of condemnation was the intended expression of faith by God – the God who became as a gift in the Spirit to Gentiles and Jews, to men and women, to the young and old, such that all might share in the community of faith and take part in the work of God in the world.

As the book is concluding, she offers in chapter 13 an essay on "Loving our Enemies," which helps clarify some of her skepticism toward the posture of certainty that many in the church maintain. Without question, she does not appreciate the posture of certainty that defines both evangelical fundamentalism and liberal fundamentalism.

As we close out this worship series, I invite you to consider Held Evan's approach to wholehearted faith, which does not maintain a posture of divine knowledge that should not and cannot be challenged, but instead embraces a conviction of faith, which willingly follows the divine will even when the path forward is not fully understood. Faith is the conviction of things hoped for, not a certainty in the things already perceived.

To understand why loving our enemies is such an important focus in having wholehearted faith, we have to think about what defines our enemies. In today's divisiveness, it's perhaps easier to point fingers or even say the names of those we would define as our enemies than ever before. We have drawn some pretty firm lines in the sand, or perhaps in our friend's lists on social media, and anyone

who is on the other side of the line, or no longer part of our digital following, could be called an enemy. If you aren't in my echo-chamber, you are an 'other' and not someone I wish to associate with, follow, or even listen to.

It used to be said that republicans and democrats were just two members of the same community with differing views on how we progress as a nation. It used to be said that urbanites, suburbanites, and ruralites (is that a word?) were all part of the same economic cycle, all necessary to and for one another. It used to be said that immigrants and natural citizens were all a healthy part of our growing cities and economy. But today, it feels more and more like these demographic demarcations are bordered with de-militarized zones. Don't cross the line, and we're going to be 'just ok;' but if you take one step too far, you will have entered enemy territory and you may quickly be attacked.

And let's be honest, this isn't just an American issue; turn on the news, right? Russia vs Ukraine. Israel vs Hamas. There are literal wars happening because people have marked and targeted others as their "enemy."

Jesus has some pretty firm words to offer in Matthew 5 about how we should treat our enemies. Jesus doesn't go into great detail in defining our enemies; it's left up to our own understanding of who would fall into that grouping, but Jesus is pretty firm in how we might approach those who we call our enemy.

Jesus begins by using a common phrase in his vernacular, "You have heard it said that ..." Anytime Jesus begins a teaching with this phrase, the following lesson is going to be why such a saying is incongruent with God's divine will. Almost anytime Jesus begins with this phrase, he ends up quoting some passage from the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament. He's going to tell us why that phrase, even as it comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, lacks a deeper understanding of God's will.

However, in this case, that's not what happens. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" This phrase is not found anywhere in the Old Testament. We are instructed to "love our neighbors as ourselves" in the book of Leviticus, but nowhere are we taught to hate our enemies. It seems that Jesus is picking up on a cultural phenomenon that was learned from beyond the Jewish religious beliefs or Biblical tradition.

Wherever the quote came from, Jesus is about to tell us why it's wrong.

Jesus goes on to say that we should love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. He flips the script, as Jesus so often does. To clarify his point, he asks a series of instructional questions: "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even tax-collectors do the same? And if you only greet your family members, what more are you doing than others? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?"

In speaking to the Jews of Israel in this passage, Jesus uses the tax-collectors and Gentiles as groups of people whom the Jews did not look favorably upon. The tax-collectors were Roman sympathizers who took from Israel to give to Caesar. The Gentiles were considered unclean non-members of Israel. To do something the same as the tax-collectors and Gentiles is to say you too are unclean, and you too are no

better than those who have turned their back on the Jewish community to support to oppressive regime of Rome.

Jesus doesn't go into greater detail here as to why loving our enemies is so important. He simply wraps up this teaching moment by saying, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." To love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us is evidently the way of God – such a posture is part of the way our God is perfect. Which invites us to zoom out and to consider how this short teaching fits into the greater framework of Biblical truth and how it invites us to wholehearted faith today.

From a macro level, if we go back and consider our summer-long focus on the greater invitation of God throughout the Biblical text, it's clear that intrinsic to God's desire for creation is to embody *shalom*. Let's expand upon that word.

In our English language, the Hebrew word *shalom* is translated as "peace." What comes to mind when you think of the word *peace*?

Last weekend Jen and I took a trip to Florida as a belated birthday trip for myself. We stayed at a golfing resort (surprise, surprise) that's in the middle of nowhere. The closest gas station, grocery store, post office ... the closest anything was over 30 minutes away. One afternoon, after a round of golf, I joined Jen at the pool, which overlooked a gator-infested lake next to the lodge. We were the only two people at pool. I laid my elbows up on the infinity edge overlooking the lake and watched as the herons were flying around and as fish popped out of the water. The sun was out and the breeze was cool. There was no noise pollution; there was little air pollution; and there were no construction noises building high rises next door. Though the pool water was almost too cold, it was, as we often say in our English vernacular, *peaceful*.

It is this kind of tranquility that we often associate with the word *peace*. It's the sound of the Atlantic ocean on a beach walk at sunrise. It's the flow of a curving brook on a hike in the Shenandoah Mountains. It's a glass of wine on the porch of a French Chateau. It's the day after Thanksgiving break, once the family has gone home and the house is again quiet and clean. How do you define *peace*?

As peaceful as these moments might be, even if only for fleeting moments, they are a far cry from the Hebrew *shalom*. In the Biblical view, *shalom* is not about our individual moments of quiet happy reprieve. In fact, *shalom* is not about our individual selves at all. "Shalom pushes back against the idea that we are independent and recognizes that we are actually interdependent."¹ Indeed, one cannot experience the fullness of *shalom*, as understood from the Hebrew Scriptures, alone at all.

Shalom finds its root in the Hebrew word for *wholeness*. This is a wholeness that defines the world as God desires it, where-in we are all living, working, and sharing as one humanity, unified by the glory and love of God.

Rabbi David Zaslow writes, "Shalom is the most radical union of opposites imaginable. Shalom brings together people who disagree with each other so that each will listen deeply to the 'other' side. It is

the people you do not agree with who have the greatest gift for you – the gift of the potential for wholeness.”ⁱⁱ

When we isolate ourselves from one another, when we maintain our sound-proof echo chambers, we are only hurting ourselves from experiencing the gift of shalom that is only possible through the unifying of God’s created humanity.

This is, as Held Evans writes, perhaps the greatest challenge of faith, and the greatest invitation to wholehearted faith: “to be faithful hearers and curious recipients, even and perhaps especially of stories that differ from our own.”ⁱⁱⁱ Held Evans further calls attention to an old saying, credited to a variety of origins, which states, “An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard.”

We cannot experience the shalom that God desires for humanity whilst maintaining animosity and exclusion from those whom we deem our enemies, and are unlikely to change our posture towards our enemies until we take time to hear one another’s stories.

And this, ultimately, leads us to one of the foundational principles that is both the source of Rachel Held Evans’ skepticism and questions, and also the formula for embracing faith more wholeheartedly.

The framework of Biblical interpretation that allows us to create and maintain echo chambers, which increase our animosity towards one another and limits our ability to experience a God-divined *shalom*, is to think that we have an exclusive understanding and divinely gifted comprehension of the Biblical story. When we, as an individual person of faith, as an individual congregation, as an individual denomination ... we when, apart from the whole, claim an absolute, indisputable, and undeniable grasp of right and wrong, or of faithful and unfaithful, we have failed to follow Christ. When we determine that our way of understanding faithfulness cannot be changed any further, we have either reached the promises of Revelation and Christ is standing before us in final glory, or we are wrong.

Stay with me for one more minute – because there is beauty in claiming the unknown, and acknowledging that something greater is out there than that which we have already determined for ourselves.

I have a dear colleague, someone I met over 20 years ago, who recently retired after 40-or-more years of ordained ministry in the Virginia Conference. He’s full-blooded Cherokee, and has been an advocate for Native American rights and ministries his entire career. I am certain that he and I wouldn’t agree on every major political or social issue facing the church or our nation today. But he taught me about the unjust ways our commonwealth has treated native citizens. I didn’t know until he and I shared in conversation that even up to 1980s a Virginia resident couldn’t claim native identity on their birth certificate. Even as full-blooded Cherokees, his family wasn’t allowed to officially identify as Cherokee or native, because they lived in Virginia, which prohibited claiming a native identity. Someone who was native had to be willing to claim a different ethnic identity to become a legal Virginia resident. Along with learning about the social ills his family and ancestors have faced, he also taught me a lot about seeing the value of God in creation, in the trees, the animals, and even the water ... something that is intrinsic to the faith of the native population.

I could spend another 30 minutes giving examples of how my own understanding of faith and God's activity in this world have been impacted through the stories of others. Like the questions posed by Rachel Held Evans, some of the stories I've heard have made me question the church ... they've made me question the lessons I learned in Sunday School growing up. But ultimately, and more importantly, the stories of others have helped me understand the work of God in this world so much better. The stories of others have moved me beyond my own limited understanding to embrace a greater appreciation for how God might use me, or this church, or even whole communities (like the City of Alexandria) to ensure that God's desired *shalom* is not a fleeting thought, but a lived and concrete reality.

Wholehearted faith is not about claiming a limited and flimsy foundation so that me, myself, and I can reach some eternal salvation. No, wholehearted faith is about embracing God's desire for a creation that exists in a posture of salvation – where there is no exclusion for those who are different, or condemnation of those with whom we disagree. Wholehearted faith is about embracing God's invitation to share in something greater than ourselves – something greater than the church – something greater than our echo-chambers or closed circles of connectivity. Wholehearted faith is about joining in something beyond limit, where the hopes and dreams of all of God's created might be possible, where no one has unmet needs, and everyone is welcomed at the table – yes, even our enemies.

The call of the gospel is not one of universal opinion, in fact, it is our differences – our different stories, our different paths, our different experiences – that allow us to celebrate the expansiveness of God's creation.

So I invite you to hear this invitation of the Gospel, and the invitation that Rachel Held Evans echoes: claim faith – claim faith wholeheartedly – claim faith among one another, that we might share in honest and authentic community with each another, and that together, intentionally together, we might live in to the desire of God for all of creation to experience *shalom* – *wholeness, faithfulness, and true life*. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Rachel Held Evans. *Wholehearted Faith*. HarperOne, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Held Evans.

ⁱⁱⁱ Held Evans.