

GOD IN YOU, YOU IN GOD
(John 14:15-21)

I've done something like seventy or eighty weddings over the years – enough that I've got the service pretty well down pat. But even after all those weddings, there's still one part of the service that always strikes me as kind of weird. It's where I ask, "John, will you have Mary to be your wife, and will you love her faithfully as long as you both shall live?" And then ask, "Mary, will you have John to be your husband, and will you love him faithfully as long as you both shall live?" And the answer in both cases is, "I will, with the help of God."

Now, you might be wondering, "What's weird about that?"

Just this: I don't ask, "John, do you love Mary? Mary, do you love John?" We assume that John and Mary do love one another. We wouldn't be there otherwise. But the church isn't primarily concerned about how they feel about one another. No, we ask "Will you love Mary? Will you love John?"

You can't command a feeling or an emotion. You can't say, "Be happy!" and expect a depressed person to cheer up. You can't order someone to like their enemy. And it seems just as weird to expect a person to promise to love someone else. But that's just what we do in a wedding service.

And that's just what Jesus does in today's scripture. He says some comforting things to his disciples, reassures them that they won't be on their own after he's gone. And then he makes a surprising move: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (14:15).

Where's the comfort in that? Keeping Jesus' commandments is usually anything but comforting. Keeping Jesus' commandments usually calls us to live in ways that don't come naturally or easily.

We're all familiar with the slogan "What would Jesus do?" Peter Gomes believed that's the wrong question because "we are not Jesus and thus are unlikely to be able to know what he would do, or to do what he did," so appealing to Jesus as an example is an impossible goal (*The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, p. 66). According to Gomes, the better question is "What would Jesus have me do?" (*Scandalous Gospel*, p. 69)

That's easy. Jesus spells it out in today's lesson: What he would have us do is keep his commandments. But what are Jesus' commandments? He didn't leave a collection of Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots like the Ten Commandments.

The only thing Jesus ever commands is love – love God, love our neighbor, love our enemy. And when we hear commandments like that, don't we wish he had just said something like "don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't covet"? It's a whole lot easier to obey a command not to kill than it is to love an enemy.

Tony Campolo once preached at Harvard's Memorial Church – had the congregation spellbound – until he asked if they had prayed for Osama bin Laden. That produced an awkward silence because we had demonized bin Laden and we don't normally pray for demons.

It's one thing to love Jesus, but it's not quite so easy to love those whom Jesus loved. We love people who are...lovable – people who are acceptable and agreeable to us, people who are more or less like us. To think that Jesus might love people who we're convinced are out to do us in is hard to swallow. We would rather think that Jesus loves those we love and hates those we hate. Unfortunately, there's not a single instance where Jesus hated anyone, no matter how odious the person might be.

We need to be clear that love isn't merely a stronger version of liking. You may have seen the commercial for New York Life, that says the kind of gifts we give says something about how a relationship grows, from "I like you" to "I really like you" to "I love you" to "I will always love you." That sounds about right when it comes to romantic relationships. We talk about love at first sight, but there has to be some liking in there if the relationship is going anywhere.

No so with Jesus' command to love. Jesus' command takes us straight to loving without ever passing liking. Jesus never commanded us to like anyone, and that's a good thing because that would be commanding the impossible.

Walter Wink suggests that the ultimate religious question today is, "How can we find God in our enemies?" We would rather imagine God as a protector of the chosen people (i.e. ourselves) rather than a God who makes the "sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt. 5:45). But that's the kind of God we worship, whether we like it or not. Which isn't to say there aren't plenty of false prophets around today who can't conceive of a God who loves our enemies.

St. Augustine long ago said, "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself." In other words, love your enemies in part because you made them so.

It's almost never the case that a conflict comes down to a struggle between pure good and absolute evil, no matter what political leaders may say. Unfortunately, we tend to be too innocent to recognize our own lack of innocence.

How many times after 9/11 did you hear the rationale that the terrorists hate us because of our freedoms? In fact, millions of Muslims dislike us for good reason. They resent American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia, they resent it that we prop up corrupt, oppressive regimes, they resent our one-sided support for Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. One Muslim leader said after 9/11, "The warning sirens are wailing but who in Washington is listening?"

Hatred and violence is equally degrading to those who use it and to those who suffer from it. To quote Augustine again, "Imagine the vanity of thinking that you enemy can do more harm than your enmity."

The command to love our enemies reminds us that our first task is to look below the surface and recognize our common humanity. If the first thing we see is *Enemy*, then we dehumanize them and freeze them in that role and basically say there's no point dealing with them in peaceful ways. But getting to know them and feeling their pain and their fear takes us a long way toward understanding and loving them.

To go back to Walter Wink, he talks about “the gift of the enemy.” What he means is that when we start to list the things we dislike about our enemies, we find that a lot of things on the list are things we dislike and find unacceptable about ourselves, too. We project our own shortcomings on our enemies. The enemy’s gift is to enable us to see aspects of ourselves that we can’t discover any other way. Or to put it another way, our enemies can actually be the way to God. They hold up a mirror so we can see ourselves. And maybe, just maybe, they help to transform us as much as we hope to transform them.

Loving enemies isn’t easy. It may even seem impossible. But it can be done and it has been done. God’s forgiving love can free us to love. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, that Jesus promised his followers frees us not only to forgive our enemies, but to work for their transformation. As Abraham Lincoln said, “I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends.” That’s the ultimate goal.

At the height of the Cold War, no one could have anticipated the radical changes Mikhail Gorbachev would initiate in the Soviet Union. At the height of apartheid in South Africa, no one could have anticipated the new direction F. W. de Klerk would steer his country in.

If God can forgive, redeem, and transform me, then I also have to believe that God can work the same wonders in anyone. Loving our enemies means seeing them through the prism of God’s reign, not only as they are now, but as they can become when transformed by the power of God.