

“Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy – Part Five”

Proverbs 25:21-22; Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 15, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts and our lives might be transformed by your perfect mercy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

We are finally at the fifth and final installment of our sermon series, “Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy”. In case you can’t remember how a sermon series with a four-part title ended up with five installments, it’s because we spent the first week on an introduction that touched on the important, unnamed category that other people in our lives might fall into: family. We identified the context in which we’re exploring these different relationships, namely, a season of extreme political division and a pandemic that has both revealed our dependence and connection to others and increased our sense of isolation.

In the following weeks, we talked about how the pandemic shed new light on Jesus’ teaching to “lay down our lives for our friends” and how the biblical command to love our neighbors as ourselves is an invitation to mutuality, vulnerability, and courage. Last week, Tesa helped us reflect on the truth that our approach to strangers should be shaped by a humble recognition that sometimes we are the strangers who needs welcome. I am tempted to say that we saved the hardest for last, but the truth is that the gospel commandments for all these relationships call us to be better than we are, and better than we sometimes believe ourselves capable of being.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” is fairly intimidating as scripture verses go, don’t you think? So let’s begin by stating clearly that we’re going to fail. We are not always going to honor our fathers and mothers. We are going to hold onto our lives sometimes, even when it causes harm to our friends. We will frequently neglect to recognize our neighbors when they are right in front of us and even when we do, we will not make the most loving choices. We will allow our fears and prejudices to keep us from welcoming the strangers in our midst. And we will definitely fail to love our enemies. Not all the time, but often. This is one of the central paradoxes of our Christian faith: we have committed ourselves to following Jesus on the path of love and faithfulness, but we’re not very good at it. We keep trying through the grace of God through which we are forgiven and filled with the courage to do better.

So if we want to do better at loving our enemies, as we know Jesus has called us to do, perhaps it will help to think through this fraught relationship from a couple different angles. I want to highlight three different types of enemies and three different barriers to loving them. The first type of enemy is the most abstract, and it’s tied to our national identity. We think of those who are considered opponents of our country as enemies, for example, Russians or Iranians or foreign terrorists. We may assume they made themselves our enemies, by trying to do us harm. We share a narrative about these folks “hating our way of life” or wanting to take away our freedom. What would it mean to love this kind of enemy? Most of us are not actively

shaping foreign policy, so it may feel like we have little control over whether these people are our enemies or not.

It's vital to remember that the main barrier to loving this type of abstract, far-removed enemy is that the rhetoric we're fed about them is aimed at dehumanizing them in our psyches. We will accept violence done in our name more easily if we allow the deaths of some of God's children to be called "collateral damage" rather than the tragedies they really are. If we want to follow Jesus faithfully, we need to make efforts to counter this dehumanizing influence. There are lots of ways to do this. We can commit to learning more about cultures and people in other countries. We can get to know refugees and immigrants from other places now living in our own communities and listen to their stories of their homelands. We can use tools like our Global Ministries prayer calendar to hold other parts of the world in our prayers. Such learning activities and spiritual disciplines can inspire us to advocate for diplomacy-first foreign policy approaches, for weapons bans and humanitarian aid that will make everyone safer. Rather than assuming people we will never meet are less-than-human enemies, we can orient ourselves toward the wider world with an assumption those folks are fellow children of God. Our love for these supposed "enemies" may be as abstract as the "hate" we had to overcome, but it is no less powerful for that abstraction.

The second kind of enemy is much closer to home, but still fairly unknown. These are the people whose names we likely don't know, but whose behavior,

lifestyles or political opinions cause us to label them and treat them as enemies. We don't dehumanize these folks to the same degree we do foreign enemies; instead we stereotype them and make them caricatures of everything we hate. Here is where it is helpful to notice what the Bible assumes about how we relate to enemies. Certainly, there are places in the Bible where enemies are enemies because they are putting you in mortal danger. But there is just as much written about enemies that recognizes that many of our reasons for hating people are simply petty and ungenerous. The excuses we will use to write off people we don't really know are sometimes ridiculously trivial – how they spend their free time, what kind of music they listen to, whether they put their grocery cart back or not or failed to use their turn signal.

There are less petty reasons why we decide people around us that we don't know are enemies too. When our perspectives on the issues that shape our lives are so very different, it's easier to dismiss people as “irredeemable” or just people we don't desire to know, rather than to explore why they see things so differently. When we use the petty things or the weightier things to put people into categories of good and bad, we do violence to the complexity and fullness of the personhood of God's children. This barrier of stereotypes cultivates within our minds an “us/them” mentality that makes it harder for us to stay open to love.

The third category is perhaps the most vexing, the “frenemy”. These are the enemies that are not only nearby but people we do actually know and interact with on a regular basis. It could be the person who lives next door, or a co-worker, or heaven

help us, a fellow church member. We probably need to glance back at that biblical recognition of our capacity for pettiness for a moment here, along with teachings about jealousy. If we look more closely at the readings from Matthew and Luke, we'll see even more reflections of how we humans really are. Luke reveals how our feelings about our money and our stuff can damage our relationships. A transactional approach to loving other people is not the gospel. Matthew calls out our desire to give people the silent treatment by refusing to even greet them. Our judgments about other people's morality or character or behavior is not justification for treating them with anything but love and respect Jesus says. If you're going to follow me, you've got to have higher standards for yourselves.

I think there is another clue in the reading from Luke. Those opening words can help us, as we consider how to get better at loving our frenemies. "But I say to you that listen," Jesus says. And isn't that often exactly the problem? Once we've had a certain amount of negative interaction with someone we know, we decide we know who they are, and we stop listening. Everything they say or do from then on is filtered through our assessment of who and what they are. If he's arrogant, everything he says will be self-centered conceit. If she's too critical, everything she says will be judgment. If he's dumb, nothing worthwhile will come out of his mouth. If she's a gossip, her intentions in sharing information can never be good. This is how we will hear their words, and read their emails and texts, and interpret their behavior. And it is violence. To stop truly listening to someone and reject any idea

that they might grow and change, or even just be more layered than we first saw, is to do violence to a fellow child of God. It is perhaps the biggest barrier to transforming enemies into friends. And Jesus isn't having it.

We started this sermon series hearing Jesus say "Who is my mother and my brothers? Those who do the will of God." I gave away the punchline at the very beginning. Friend, neighbor, stranger, enemy – the gospel teaches us to treat them all like family. Love, love, and love again. Love with a sense of undeniable obligation. Love with an understanding that there is nothing that will sever your connection to that fellow child of God. Love sacrificially like Jesus loves. Love in ways that expose your vulnerability. Love whether you're going to be loved back or not. Love with perfect mercy like God's. Will we fail? Yes! Do we need to keep trying? Heavens, yes! May God uphold us and nurture us in our endeavors to be faithful. Hallelujah and Amen!