"Temptations in the Wilderness: Enemy Assumptions"

Luke 6:27-36; Psalm 35:1-10 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to our fellow children of God with Jesus' grace and compassion. In Jesus' name, Amen.

As we have journeyed through Lent this year – more or less our third Lent of the coronavirus pandemic – we have been exploring some of the temptations that have become more powerful, harder to resist because of the ways the wilderness wandering of the past two years has worn us down. The first two weeks, the temptations were directly connected to responses to the pandemic: we talked about the dangers of isolation and the difficulties of rejecting a scarcity mindset. In the past two weeks, the temptations we examined were things rooted in denial: our tendency to want to hold onto the past, despite the realities of the present, and our unhealthy desire to Be Happy Always, rather than making room for our sorrows and vulnerability. These are also temptations that are fairly easily connected to the pandemic.

But today, as we conclude this series, it seemed important to approach one other temptation that's become harder to resist over the past two years, not because of the pandemic itself but because of the polarized political climate in which we've been moving through the pandemic. Today we will explore the temptation to make enemies of those who live and believe differently than we do and in labeling them

enemies, avoid them, de-humanize them, and give up on them. Polarized is quite a precise description of the current political environment. Think about what you know about the positive and negative ends of a battery. That's how we're living now. We have marshalled our forces at two opposite ends, staying as far apart as possible, with unseen forces repelling us from those on the other end, even if we did try to approach one another.

So let's start by thinking about the word "enemies" a little bit. It's a pretty strong word; many of us may not even feel like we have actual enemies. Perhaps you have a "nemesis" at work, or bitter memories of someone who bullied you in middle school. But an actual enemy? For most of us, those are rare. Around the time Russia first invaded Ukraine a little over a month ago, I started reading the Psalms from the beginning, and I was struck by how many of those early psalms seemed like they made more sense if prayed on behalf of the people of Ukraine. I've usually found it difficult to relate to the "enemy" language that is sprinkled throughout many of the psalms, but putting it in that context, it seemed more believable. The tensions and dramas of my life simply don't compare to someone whose city is being held under siege, without water or food or electricity for weeks on end. How could you not pray for God to destroy your enemies under such circumstances? In the face of such brutal conflict, those of us living in safety can pray those psalms as prayers of peace, on behalf of those whose souls are in peril.

But most of the time, that's not how we relate to that language. Because our lives are relatively mundane, we end up heightening the drama of the petty conflicts of our lives and co-opting the enemy language of the psalms and other biblical texts for trivial, inappropriate purposes. In truth, the psalms are a great record of the way humans react to life. We don't know what level of danger the psalm writers were responding to; maybe it was life or death, but maybe it was just regular human drama. What we can see are some of the tendencies we fall into when we're feeling besieged or put upon. There is the paranoia. In Psalm 35, which we just read, the writer says people are contending with, fighting against, pursuing, seeking my life, devising evil. When we see enemies everywhere, it's because we're convinced everyone is out to get us. A second tendency, when we feel besieged, is to lose our capacity for self-reflection and honest confession; we're convinced we're being attacked for no good reason. "Without cause," the writer of Psalm 35 recites, "without cause." Is that true? We have no way of knowing. But we can examine our own behavior to see if we're really as blameless as we assume. Often, it turns out, we are not. There are frequently things we've done that have exacerbated the conflicts we're caught in. Even just claiming innocence can fan the flames of anger and distrust. When we're afraid, we lose perspective; our focus shrinks down to primal self-preservation. We lose sight of the humanity of our opponents, assuming they are thoroughly evil, and we lose sight of our own humanity too, assuming we are thoroughly good. Thus, it's obvious that God is on our side, for God hates evil and love good!

And here we've arrived at the third tendency we fall into regarding enemies, which is often reflected in the psalms: Those people are out of get us, for no good reason, therefore, they deserve to die and God should help us with that! Psalm 35 is particularly evocative about this part: "Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them," it says. Again, this is a prayer that might make sense in the context of Ukrainians trying to escape Mariupol, but for the conflicts that have polarized our national political climate, it is not helpful, and more importantly for us, not Christian.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you," Jesus says. It's good that he doesn't stop after "love your enemies," because that might let those of us who think we don't have enemies imagine we're off the hook. Has anyone ever hated you? Have you been cursed? Has someone abused you? We've all been done wrong at some point, whether the offense was large or small. We've had our generosity taken advantage of and never received the "thank you" we expected. Jesus is introducing an "enemy spectrum" here, if you will, one where each of us can find a place. And no matter where you are on that spectrum – whether your hurt is minor or mortal – Jesus' answer is the same: Mercy, mercy, mercy, abundant, generous mercy. It's so irritating, isn't it? Why should those people get our mercy, the benefit of the doubt, or even a second thought? But then I'm caught on the second to last sentence, and convicted: for God "is kind to the ungrateful."

Being a Christian is supposed to make us behave differently in the world than we would otherwise. Has God's kindness made me less ungrateful? Has God's mercy made me more loving and generous? Have I even begun to grasp God's approach to enemies? Commanding us to love our enemies does not mean Jesus is saying "anything goes; anyone can do anything to anybody and nobody should try to bring consequences to bear." The standard Jesus is setting is mercy, across the board. It is a much deeper ethic of good and evil than our superficial obsessions with "fair" and "just deserts." While we're praying with the psalmist for our enemies to be ensnared in the net they hid for us, Jesus is praying forgiveness for those who don't even understand the nature of their sin.

The wilderness wandering of our polarized climate – that is, the level of fear that is motivating people – has grown to a fever pitch recently. Legislators are demonizing children, trying to make them disappear by outlawing the words that have given them a sense of identity. Asylum seekers have languished in tent cities and worse, labeled as disease vectors by policies applied with absurdly obvious double standards. Elected officials threaten the lives of their colleagues and seem to bear no consequence. In the face of such vitriol and violence, how do we faithfully live out Jesus' command to love our enemies? Is it possible to restrain the forces of hatred while maintaining a soft heart of compassion and mercy? Jesus aimed to eliminate enemies by working to make them friends or die trying. We are not Jesus, but we are called to follow Jesus. What would it look like if we tried to imitate God and be kind

to the wicked? Not because we think our kindness would change them, but because we don't want to let their wickedness change us?

This is, in some very real ways, the central question of our faith: How do we protect and defend the vulnerable (including ourselves where applicable), while holding the merciful, loving heart of Jesus at the core of how we do that? As a psalmist might say, We cannot love our enemies if they've already killed us. We cannot claim to follow Jesus if we hate or destroy our enemies. So we pray for guidance, for wisdom, for humility and endurance and peace. We pray for mercy, God's mercy, to flood our souls and our lives and our communities and our nation and our world. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we lean on God to resist the temptation to demonize those who live and believe differently than we do. We lean on God to resist the temptation to assume others are evil and we are good. We lean on God to find deliverance from those who would hurt and destroy. Sometimes that will mean retreating; sometimes it will mean speaking up and speaking out, even if our voice is shaking. Sometimes it will mean putting ourselves between those determined to cause harm and their targets, taking blows meant for another, to illustrate that all are beloved of God. But all of it grounded in mercy; all of it grounded in compassion. All of it grounded in the conviction that every body is a beloved creation of God, deserving of dignity, safety and flourishing, deserving of salvation from wandering in the wilderness, deserving of kindness and generosity and the abundant mercy of God. Amen and Amen.