

“Mission Impossible?”  
July 18, 2010

Deuteronomy 30:11-14  
Matthew 5:43-47

### Prelude Meditation

Walking the Path of Jesus includes walking “humbly with God, acknowledging our own shortcomings while honestly seeking to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies.”

-- Phoenix Affirmation Eight

Jesus said to his disciples, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

So who is it that *you* hate? Who is it that you refuse to forgive? Who has hurt you or someone you love or *something* you love so viciously or so carelessly that love seems impossible, but the possibility of revenge seems oh so sweet? Who is it in your life or in the world that you want to see punished, not loved?

Is it the ex-spouse who betrayed or abused you? The parent or child who cut you out of their life and heart? Is it, instead, the business partner or contractor or customer who cheated you, took advantage of you, or lied about you? Is it the driver who was drunk or simply inattentive and who took the life of your dog or cat or, dear God, have mercy, your child, your parent, your friend?

Who is it that you can’t imagine *ever* being able to hold in love? Maybe it’s someone you don’t even know ... could it be any of the people whose arrogance or greed led to the environmental catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico ... or in the Niger River delta or in Bhopal, India, or in some other part of the globe? Is it, instead, one of the Wall Street whizzes who created new and improved ways to make themselves rich while making the country’s financial health abysmal? Perhaps it’s the person who masterminded the Prop. 8 campaign, the one who came up with the ugliest and most effective lies to deprive you or people you love the basic right to marry. Or maybe it’s someone whose identity I can’t begin to guess.

Whoever it is, whoever it is you don’t want to love, forgive, or hold in compassion, I want you to bring a picture of that person to mind or, if it’s someone whose face you don’t know, I want you to imagine something that symbolizes that person for you. Once you have that person or that symbol in mind, I want you to imagine that he or she or they are sitting right here. [Put chair in middle of chancel.]

Jesus said to his disciples, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Can you do that? Can you love that person sitting here? Can you pray for that person – pray for his or her wellbeing? Or is Jesus asking too much of his disciples? Is God asking for the impossible from those who seek to follow what the Phoenix Affirmations call the Path of Jesus? If it seems impossible or nearly impossible to love

that person, please allow me to ask one more question this morning. Despite how out of the question or how very, very hard it would be to love that person ... if you look deep within yourselves, is there something – and it might be a small, even feeble something – that feels drawn to the possibility of at least *trying* to love that person?

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The Biblical testimonies of faith make the claim that God has indeed placed something within us that knows that the path of love and forgiveness is the path to fullness of life. As the Book of Deuteronomy tells the story, long, long ago, Moses assembled the Israelites in the land of Moab and called them to renew their covenant with YHWH, the God of Israel. Moses reminded the people of the contents of that covenant, and then he said to them, “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away ... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” Generations later, the prophet Jeremiah pointed to the same truth when he told the people of Jerusalem that YHWH had promised, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts ... [and] they shall all know me.”

This is the Biblical witness of faith: that God is with us, within us as well as between and around us. Through the ancient prophets God promised that we would know the way we should go. In his teaching and preaching, Jesus promised his disciples that he would be with them – with us – *always*, to the end of the age.

Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and other traditions teach that there is something within us that *knows* ... something within us that knows that love opens the path to life, that hate and revenge distort and choke off life. The world’s religious traditions teach that there is something within us that knows that that not only does an eye for an eye leave the whole world blind, but revenge for every wrong leaves the whole world wronged and trapped in a cycle of vengeance, vengeance, and more vengeance.

As Moses and Jeremiah, Jesus and Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Sister Helen Prejean, and the men and women of the organization Murder Victim Families for Reconciliation all keep trying to tell us and show us, abundant life, blessed life, life worth living, depends on our ability to love, and it depends especially on our ability to love those we may consider our enemies or who may consider us theirs. That law or commandment or wisdom is written on our hearts, and we *know*. The knowledge may be buried under layers of fear, covered by the scar tissue of our own woundedness, or hidden under our own self-righteousness, but it is still there, waiting to be freed to do the work of healing and reconciliation it was put there to do.

Nelson Mandela, the first post-apartheid president of South Africa, found this knowing within himself, and he trusted it. He trusted it despite the years of being hunted by the South African government; he trusted it despite nearly 30 years of imprisonment; and he trusted it despite more than 30 years of having his friends, comrades, and family members persecuted, brutalized, even tortured to death.

As last year’s movie *Invictus* tells the story, Mandela carefully studied his Afrikaner captors and jailors during the decades he spent in prison. He watched them, listened to them, saw them. He learned what mattered to the Afrikaners he encountered, what scared them, what made them proud, and then he used that knowledge to help heal a badly broken nation.

After he was released from prison and then elected president, many if not most of Mandela's supporters and many if not most of his opponents expected revenge, retribution, revolution. Many hoped and many feared that the unspeakable horror and violence of apartheid would lead to more horror and violence, all for the purpose of evening the score.

But President Mandela had a different vision and a different agenda. He wanted healing, not revenge; he envisioned reconciliation, not retribution; he sought a future rooted in hope and possibility, not a future forever maimed and distorted by a past of brutality and hate. And he *knew* something. He *knew* that the only way to move into that future was to love those he might just as easily hated as enemies. He *knew*, because it was written on his heart, that the only way to move into the future he envisioned was to bring out the best in those who considered him an enemy. And he knew this, as one movie reviewer noted, *both* as a matter of Gandhian (and Christian) principle *and* as a matter of shrewd political calculation.

A man of nonviolence and compassion and a skillful politician, President Mandela found an effective way to love and bring out the best in those who had been and wanted to remain his enemies. And the way of love in that time and place was the way of rugby and the South African team the Springboks. Nelson Mandela knew that the way of love and reconciliation required rugby and the Springboks, because he knew how important, how beloved, how powerful a symbol the team was to the Afrikaners, and he knew that disbanding, discarding, or simply diss-ing the team would have hardened the hearts of the Afrikaners and made healing and reconciliation even more impossible than it already seemed. He knew, because the truth was written on his heart, strengthened by the teachings of Gandhi and Jesus, and kept alive by William Henley's poem *Invictus*. He knew, and he trusted what he knew. If you want to know, I recommend the movie or the book on which it was based, entitled, appropriately enough, *Playing the Enemy*.

Jesus said to his disciples, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Somewhere within us, we know that that Jesus' call to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors is the call to walk the path of peace and abundant life. Somewhere within us, we know that, as impossible as it may seem, loving our enemies and being willing to call forth the best in them is both principled *and* practical, faithful *and* fruitful. Without the love that crosses the boundaries of nation, tribe, race, and religion, we remain broken off from one another and from parts of our very selves. Without the love that ignores the designation "enemy," we are all caught in a cycle of distrust, disgust, and defeat of one group by another.

Through the prophets of ancient Israel, through the one Christians know as the Christ, through the prophets and visionaries within us and around the world, the God of countless names and endless compassion is calling us to love our enemies, to find ways to bring out the best in them, and to let them bring out the best in us. What God calls us to do, God gives us the grace and the courage to accomplish.

The Spirit of Life calls us. She is not asking us to undertake some impossible, pie-in-the-sky project that maybe – maybe – we might get around to doing tomorrow or next month or next year. The Spirit of Life calls us to do what is possible and what is necessary for our healing, the healing of our enemies, and the healing of the world.

The Spirit is calling, to you and to me. Imagine once again that the person or people you find hardest to hold in love and forgiveness is sitting in this chair. Hear the Spirit's call to love. Hear it; trust it. Let that call move you to love. Let the healing start – right here, right now.

With and in God's grace, let it be so. Amen.

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