

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES?

Luke 6:27-28

Proverbs 25:21-22

Romans 12:20-21

*A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on February 24, 2019, the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6:27-28)

*If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;
for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,
and the Lord will reward you. (Proverbs 25:21-22)*

No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:20-21)

I.

“Love your enemies” is not the only teaching of Jesus Christ that leads me to question the seriousness – or at least reach – of my faith, but it is one of the main sayings that serves up such a challenge. When Jesus adds “Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you,” my doubts remain.

I am not a person who has a lot of enemies (at least that I am aware of!), but across the years I have been wronged a couple of times in serious ways, and I have had several significant relationships end – professional, personal, familial. Unless a divinely initiated miracle occurs, I expect neither these wrongs to be righted nor these relationships to be restored.

I rarely harbor anger or endless mourning, and dreams of revenge do not awaken me from nighttime sleep. For the most part I have learned to accept things I cannot change, change only the things I can, and have acquired some measure of wisdom to know the difference.¹ So by and large I am able to live with sufficient happiness in the *present* and look to the *future* with hope, despite wrongs I have suffered, relationships that have been broken, enemies who once stood at the gate.

But to hear – twice in the New Testament² – Jesus say “Love your enemies” sounds a far cry from the peace I have made with my own. *Accepting* what has happened in the past seems a far cry from *loving* people who have made the past difficult. Thus, I cannot help but question the seriousness of my faith when I know that deep down I neither expect nor desire to love my enemies.

So this sermon is as much for me as for you.

¹ This “serenity prayer” plays a large part in Alcoholics Anonymous, and is attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

² Luke 6:27 and Matthew 5:44.

II.

Several decades after Jesus calls his hearers and future followers to “love their enemies,” the Apostle Paul picks up this sentiment and fleshes it out with an image most of us have heard at some point in our lives. Paul writes:

*If your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink;
for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.
Do not be overcome by evil,
but overcome evil with good.*

Paul pulls this image of “burning coals” from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs:

*If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;
for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,
and the Lord will reward you.*

It is clear that for both Paul and Proverbs, the image of “heaping burning coals upon the heads of our enemies” is an act that seeks healing, forgiveness, restoration, reconciliation. It may be one step *removed* from “loving our enemies,” but at the very least it is an *attempt* to bring closure and resolution.

But as I think about this image of burning coals, I cannot help but wonder how applying *heat and fire* to human skin can be healing.

- Feeding those from whom we are estranged when they are hungry and giving them drink when they are thirsty are certainly acts in the direction of loving our enemies, but how can “heaping burning coals” on their heads be an act of love?
- Is there something deeper and more complex going on with this command to “love our enemies” or with this image of “heaping burning coals”?

III.

I believe there is. Follow me a bit further into the Bible and we will get there.

Some of you will recall that the Old Testament figure of Moses was in the presence of *fire* at several major points in his life:

When Moses tended the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro, God appeared in a *burning bush* and called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt.³

After Moses had led the people through the waters of the Red Sea, he went to the top of Mount Sinai where – in the midst of *smoke and fire* – he received from the hand of God the Ten Commandments, which gave the people of Israel their way of life and identity as they prepared to enter the Promised Land.⁴

³ Exodus 3:2.

⁴ Exodus 19:18.

In the final scene in Exodus, Moses has led the people to the *edge* of the Promised Land. The narrator says:

...the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it... Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey... for the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

With this the Book of Exodus ends with Moses and the people of Israel poised at the edge of the Promised Land, being led by *fire*. Fire plays a major role in Moses' life.

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Given this importance of fire for Moses, a legend grew up within Judaism that connects the *fire* of his life with the *coals* from which fire comes.⁵ The background to the legend grows out of the opening chapters of Exodus:

Prior to Moses' birth, the Egyptian Pharaoh fears a population explosion among the Israelites that could threaten his grip on the throne, so he orders that all boys born to Hebrew women be thrown into the Nile.⁶

Moses' mother Jochebed places Moses in a small basket on the Nile where he is spotted by Pharaoh's daughter who draws him out of the Nile to raise him as her own.⁷

From this *story* in Exodus, the legend develops:

When Moses is three years old, he is playing with the family in Pharaoh's palace and he reaches up and takes Pharaoh's crown from his head.

Pharaoh's ever-paranoid advisers sense a threat to his royal power and advise him to have the toddler put to death.

But the angel Gabriel disguises himself as one of Pharaoh's advisers and proposes a test to discern if the toddler intended to usurp the throne or was just playing.

The angel places before Moses an onyx stone and a *burning coal*.

The angel says that if Moses reaches for the coal, it will prove he is just a child attracted to the shiniest object, but if he reaches for the stone, it will prove that he is indeed after the crown.

At first, Moses reaches for the stone, but the angel intervenes and places Moses' hand on the burning coal. The coal burns his fingers and Moses pulls his hand back and puts his fingers in his mouth, which cools his fingers but burns his tongue and lips in the process.

⁵ The legend comes from Shemoth Rabba 1:26. Josephus recorded it in *Jewish Antiquities*; Freud refers to it in *Moses and Monotheism*. My source for it is Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 89-93,

⁶ Exodus 1:22.

⁷ Exodus 2:1-10.

The angel's gesture thus *saves* Moses' life, for Pharaoh concludes Moses is not trying to usurp the throne; but the whole exercise leaves the child with a scarred mouth, a mouth which will remain scarred throughout his life, a mouth that will bear a speech impediment that is referred to several times in the Book of Exodus.⁸

Thus, in the legend, the *burning coal* is a mixed blessing for Moses. It *saves* his life, *and* it leaves him *scarred* and *impedes his speech*.

- Yet it is Moses' scarred mouth – stammering and impeded as it is – that produces speech by which Moses answers God's call at the burning bush to say to Pharaoh "Let my people go."⁹
- It is Moses' scarred mouth by which he passes on the Ten Commandments to the people at Mount Sinai.¹⁰
- It is with his scarred mouth that Moses pleads to God on behalf of the people after the incident with the Golden Calf,¹¹ and it is through his scarred mouth that Moses blesses the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the Promised Land under Joshua.¹²

Though Moses is *scarred* by the "coal of fire," the coal *saves his life* from Pharaoh *and* leads to his *calling* as *liberator* and *lawgiver* for the people of God.

IV.

You have been patient through a lot of Bible and legend, so let me try to bring this home for us.

I believe that when Paul reaches back into Proverbs and connects Jesus' call to "love your enemies" with "heaping coals of fire upon their heads," Paul is saying that whenever we seek to resolve what has happened to us at the hands of those who have wronged us, at the hands of those who have hurt us, at the hands of those from whom we have become estranged, we will not emerge from such efforts unsigned by fire, and neither will they.

- "Coals of fire" burn.
- They damage whatever they touch, and whatever touches them: fingers, lips, tongues, mouth, skin. They char hearts and minds, emotions and spirits.
- Their scars never completely go away.

But as they did for Moses, "coals of fire" also affirm life, lead to life, give life, indeed save life.

Thus, when we heap "coals of fire" on people who have hurt us, when "coals of fire" are heaped on us, we will be *scarred* to be sure, but we can also experience life, in newness and restoration, in renewed clarity and purpose. In burning bush, on Mount Sinai, at the edge of Promised Land, it is through fires and its coals that God speaks to Moses.

⁸ Exodus 4:10-17.

⁹ Exodus 5:1.

¹⁰ Exodus 20:1-21.

¹¹ Exodus 32:11-14.

¹² Deuteronomy 33.

V.

My friends, if we heap “coals of fire”

- upon the heads of our enemies
- upon the heads of those who have done us grave injustice
- upon the heads of those with whom we have experienced deep and unrepaired rift

we can be sure that their hair will be singed and their skin scarred; we can be sure as well that the hands with which we lift the coals and place them on the heads of our nemeses will also be burned. Our scars and theirs will never completely heal.

But in the providential care of the God whose divine Son calls us to “love our enemies,” through the heaping of “coals of fire” the voice of God will speak and be heard, people will cross over from the slavery of rift and broken relationship to the freedom of resolution if not reconciliation, the law of God will be given and received, a measure of justice will occur, and the Promised Land of healing and reconciliation will draw nearer in time and space.

“Loving our enemies” burns, but it heals as well.

Amen.