

On the Care and Feeding of Enemies (Romans 12:16b-21)

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I suspect the Holy Spirit of playing a practical joke, though with utterly serious intent. It so happens that this preacher belongs to a community which is currently under sharp scrutiny from its opponents within our church. In face of the “enemy,” we the defendants are tempted to busy ourselves with counterplots and schemes of retaliation. I say that is a temptation. At least I speak for myself. So what does the Holy Spirit up and do? He saddles me with a text (this Epistle for the Third Sunday After the Epiphany) on the subject of loving one’s enemies, on repaying evil with good. And then, as if to make me eat crow publicly, he has me stand up and preach on this text. As you see, I have my lesson cut out for me. But maybe in the process you will learn something too.

The text: Romans 12:16b-21. That last verse, please, deserves your special attention. In fact, may I ask you to commit it to memory, for I’d like to call on you later to repeat it: *Never be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

I

“On the Care and Feeding of Enemies.” Enemy: E-N-E-M-Y. E: “E” stands for “evil.” Your enemy is one who does you evil. Do you have such enemies? Is it difficult at the moment to think of any? Of course, if you have no enemies or if you are constitutionally unable to admit that you have, then you have no need of this sermon. On the other hand, you may have too sentimental a notion of what makes enemies enemies. Maybe you are thinking of enemies as people who *hate* you. And at the moment you cannot imagine anyone doing that. So it is tempting to conclude, we have no enemies—that is, we have no haters.

The truth is, enemies don’t have to hate us—at least not consciously—in order to qualify as our enemies, to do us evil. For that matter, speaking of being hated, we do receive our share of hatred too. All of us in this room do. You don’t need me to remind you that, already because we are white and American and affluent and hence are the oppressors, willy nilly, of millions of our fellowmen, we are vigorously resented by these “wretched of the earth” – at least by those who still have enough vigor left to resent us. But they, no matter how they may hate us, are not the kind whom Paul calls our enemies. No, by “enemy” Paul means rather someone who, if he hates us at all, does so unjustly, without good reason. But the wretched of the earth, though they may hate us, do not do so without just cause. For them it is we who are the enemy, and they are our victims with every right to be angry.

But could it be that we too have enemies? Are even we afflicted with oppressors who, whether they hate us or not, do in fact do us evil? Are there folks who are hurting us, perhaps not because they are deliberately out to get us but merely because we happen to be in the way of their ambitions? Or in the way of what they misunderstand as God's will? If so, then people who hurt you that way, who do you evil, qualify as enemies. Notice, Paul never denies that enemies really are enemies. He does not pretend that enemies are merely figments of your self-pitying imagination. Put it this way: Do you have the sort of enemies who, by all that is right and fair, deserve your vengeance—or rather deserve the vengeance of God? Can you, without feeling paranoid, admit that you have such enemies? “E” stands for evil, and so does your enemy.

Now will you please repeat after me: *Never be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

II

E-N-E-M-Y. N: “N” stands for “nobody”—as in the expression “nobody wins.” Nobody wins, everybody loses when you repay your enemy's evil with evil in return. When you, as we say, get even, no one really comes out even. Everyone comes out a loser.

Certainly your *enemy* loses. Ah, you say, but isn't that the purpose of vengeance, to inflict loss on the enemy? No doubt. Still that is just the point. No matter how sorely you hurt him back, you will not make him lose that one thing he ought to lose most of all, his enmity. In fact, the more you retaliate, the more you will make him your enemy. Oh, you may by vengeance compel him to lose this or that: he may lose face or lose sleep or lose money or lose years off his life. But you will not destroy him *as an enemy*.

You won't deprive him of his evildoing the way you *might* if, instead of cursing him, you *bless* him. Forgiveness is the way to heap coals of fire on his head, to melt him down from an opponent to a penitent. By repaying his evil not with evil but with good, you could thaw his enmity away. But you'll never do that if instead you take vengeance on him. Vengeance will not heap coals of fire on his head. Vengeance will only add fuel to his flame. Then you surely will make him hate. If that is how you want him to lose, by sealing him in his enmity, then by all means repay evil with evil.

But when you resort to vengeance, *nobody* wins. Not even you, the avenger. Then *you* lose too. You lose because, for one thing, you thereby allow yourself to be reduced to your enemy's level. You, the oppressed, internalize your oppressors and become like one of them. Instead of conquering your enemy's evil, you yourself are conquered *by* it.

But that is not the only way you lose. What is worse is that, when you resort to vengeance, you are competing with God, who reserves all avenging exclusively to Himself. “Never avenge yourselves,” says Paul, “but leave that to the wrath of God. For it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” If in spite of His monopoly on retribution you still insist on competing with Him, then your chances of

winning in that sort of competition are frankly not encouraging. In other words, be careful you don't add *Him* to your list of enemies.

When you repay evil for evil, not only doesn't your enemy win. You don't either. Nobody does. "N" stands for body.

"Never be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good." All together, please: *Never be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

III

"E" is for evil. "N" is for nobody. E: "E" is for Epiphany.

The Epiphany of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When God finally showed up in person, He showed up as Jesus—of all people, as Jesus of Nazareth, who consorted with publicans and sinners. How unlike God this God appears. For isn't this the same God who says, "*Vengeance is Mine*," and warns us to keep our noses out of His business, namely His terrible business of retribution? Isn't this God who shows up in Jesus the selfsame God who punishes sinners, and not only punishes them but even forbids keeping company with them?

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But then, what else does this God *Himself* do when He epiphanies as Jesus the Christ? What else, but to lower Himself to the level of the ungodly, to set foot in that off-limits area of the scornful, to fraternize with the enemy? "While we were yet *enemies*," says Paul, "Christ died for us." And as His final gesture of accepting them, He even eats and drinks with them. Jesus is God's coming-out-party. But just look at whom the party is for: the enemy.

Still, isn't that like the Scripture which is here quoted by Paul, "When your enemy hungers, feed him; when he thirsts, give him drink"? And isn't that what Jesus came doing—eating and drinking with the enemy? And doesn't He still do that, around this very altar: eat and drink with enemies like you and me? And by so doing, doesn't He heap coals of fire on *our* heads and cauterize away our enmity and warm us into trusting Him? And isn't that what makes our own enemy-loving halfway feasible: not just that we have such a good example of it in Jesus but, more than that, we ourselves are *His* examples of enemies reclaimed? Thanks to His epiphany.

So once more, the refrain: *Never be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

IV

E-N-E-M. "M" is for "*Mahlzeit*" – as in the greeting, "*Gesegnete Mahlzeit.*" For those of you who have forgotten your German—and that is permissible even for Lutherans—

gesegnete Mahlzeit means, Blessed mealtime! Or, more accurately: Eat hearty, you table-partners with God. You diners with deity, *bon appetit!* You partygoers with Christ, live it up!

Life it up with whom? Well, with the same sort of objectionable characters with whom our Lord lives it up: for example, your enemy. Your oppressor who does you evil. Celebrate with him. The guest list, now that even you and I are on it, is wide open and unsegregated. Invite anyone you like, and also those you don't like. That is now your privilege.

All right, so suppose I do want to make up to my enemy. How do I go about that? What do we do first? Well, use your imagination. Never let it be said that the Christian life is all programmed for you in advance, depriving you of all decisions of your own, leaving nothing to your imagination. However, if you really *cannot* imagine how to begin overcoming your enemy's evil with good – and understandably, ideas come slowly at first, seeing how out of practice we are – then one suggestion would be: go eat and drink with him. Take him to lunch. Buy him a drink. Invite him over for dinner. In any case, go with him to the Supper of the Lord.

I would apologize for that suggestion's seeming naivete. That is, I would if the suggestion had been original with me. But as you know, that suggestion comes on rather high recommendation. "If your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him drink." As you also know, that suggestion has been known to work—for example, with you and me. There is your enemy. Even he hungers and thirsts. God give you the naivete to try eating and drinking with him! And as you try that, let the password among us be (with a wink) "*Gesegnete Mahlzeit*"—if you take my meaning.

All together now, let's hear it for the enemy: *Never be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

V

"E" is for evil. "N" is for nobody. "E" is for Epiphany. "M" is for *Mahlzeit*. And Y? "Y" is for "yield," as on the traffic signs: YIELD RIGHT OF WAY. Yield the right of way, says Paul, to the wrath of God. For vengeance, God insists, is His alone. That is meant not only as a warning but also as consolation. Are you worried that this world seems to have gotten out of control, that evil seems to go unchecked, that oppressors (outside the church and inside it) are not being unseated, that your hurt is not being avenged? If that is your concern, it is not a foolish one. Paul does not say, Whatever prompted you to ask such a ridiculous question? No, he acknowledges the concern is reasonable, and it deserves to be reassured. Paul does not deny that enemies should get their comeuppance. They should. Furthermore, they do—sooner or later. But Paul's consolation is this: Please be assured that the comeuppance is in good hands, indeed in much better hands than mine or yours. So yield that prerogative to God, not only because He orders you to but because He wants to assure you He knows what He is doing.

But what if you happen to be one of those human agents *through* whom God discharges His retribution? What if it is by *means* of you that God chooses to recompense your enemy? What if putting your enemy in his place is a task that falls to *your* lot, not because you seized it out of an eagerness for vengeance but rather because it has been imposed on you as part of your job description? In other words, what if you happen to be one of those “governing authorities ordained by God” to whom Paul refers in the verses immediately after this text? In a democratic society, where sovereignty reposes in the people, there are a good many more “governing authorities” per square inch than there were in Paul’s day. Now if you are one of them—and it is likely that almost all of you are, in one leadership role or another—then you do have the awesome responsibility, as Paul says, of executing wrath. Nor your wrath, but God’s. That is a staggering burden.

But even then this text offers practical reassurance. How reassuring it is that you, who officially have to “execute wrath,” don’t let the wrath go to your head but are personally committed to the enemy’s forgiveness and restoration. How reassuring that you, who have to wield the sword, are more likely than most sword wielders to wield it for constructive ends, not destructive ones. How reassuring it is, even to the enemy, that you who have to put him down don’t get carried away by your job but, through it all (being a forgiven enemy yourself), still regard him as the *dear* enemy.

Now the refrain, one last time: *Never be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

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