

May 26, 2019

Sermon Manuscript

Love Over Fear, Part 2: Living It (John 8:2-11, Jonah)

This morning we'll wrap up the second half of our sermon mini-series "Love Over Fear", where we're considering how Jesus' command to love your neighbor extends even to one's enemies. Last week I acknowledges how we are certainly called to love those closest to us, which has its own set of challenges – as our Lenten workshop on Boundaries detailed – but in this series our focus is particularly on the challenge of loving the one who is *other* than us, the one whose morals or politics or race or religion is different from our own and are therefore for whom we most likely to feel hatred or contempt.^a Last Sunday we identified that, in the case of enemy-love, our primary obstacle is fear.

With the help of Dan White Jr's recently published book Love Over Fear we discussed how fear and love are mutually exclusive: that just as 1 John says "perfect love casts out fear" (4:18), it is also true that perfect fear casts out love. # Fear blinds us from seeing the image of God in others and instead causes us to view them as monsters whom we have the impulse to either *attack* or *avoid*. But it is Jesus who shows us there is a third option, which is to seek to cultivate affection for our enemies, just as God did to us in sending his son Jesus.

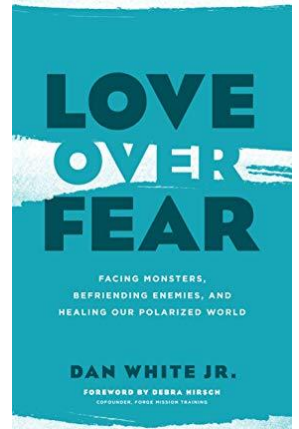
Well, in hearing from many of you in our Life Group meetings after Part 1, the impression I came away with is that most all of us are convinced that as Jesus' followers we are called to love our enemies, or "enemy-love" as I may refer to it. We believe that in *theory*, but being converted to it in *practice* – actually being inclined toward living that way and knowing *how* to live that way – that is a separate mountain to climb. So this morning, drawing once again from Dan White Jr's book, I want to explore more deeply what the path might be to actually *living out* the love of our enemies. #

Now, last week we talked about some of our obstacles to loving our enemies, not least of which is the fact our brains are physiologically wired in a way that inclines us toward fear, and the impulses of attacking or avoiding our enemies, rather than love. But today I want to consider two societal influences that further hinder us from loving our neighbor.

How We Think We "Know" Others

The first influence that causes us to be especially challenged to love our neighbor is that society teaches us we can know people without ever talking about them, that we can know people strictly by knowing information about them. And this is because Western society has come define knowledge as being the awareness of information; knowledge has become understood primarily as an awareness of factoids.^b

Have y'all seen this guy doing jeopardy right now, James Holzhauer? On Friday he won his 27th straight game and became the second contestant ever to eclipse the \$2 million mark. Well, we would probably say James is a guy who *knows* stuff, because our society has trained us to think of knowledge as the awareness of facts. And, as you can imagine, this notion has only become more



^a On the potential challenge of identifying our enemies, David Benjamin Blower notes: "some people think they have all kinds of enemies who aren't really enemies, while others are completely clueless about who many enemies they actually do have, or why they even have them. And then some people know all too well that they have enemies, and their enemies agree. In any case, the first step towards loving our enemies is to acknowledge them."

^b Historically speaking this is actually a fairly new way of understanding knowledge, as its origins can be traced to the 17th Century French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes famously gave us the slogan "I think therefore I am". You ever heard of that? "I think therefore I am". In other words, Descartes defined the human self as primarily one who thinks.

entrenched with the internet and smart phones. Yes, these recent technological advances have created the phenomenon known as “expert delusion”, which White defines as the misguided belief that just because we have *access to information* about something, we can be an expert about it. This is the delusion that we can be an expert on something just because we’ve read multiple blogs or listened to multiple podcasts or read multiple Twitter feeds about it.^c But understanding knowledge as information (combined with expert delusion) also impacts how we *view other people*, because it gives us the false impression that we can have person pegged without ever talking to them, that we can know people based solely on an awareness of their political or religious or moral views. And because this understanding of knowledge is so impersonal, it weakens the potential for us to feel empathy^d and feeds our tendency to make monsters. It’s encourages in people ridiculous beliefs about whole groups of people – like “all Muslims wanna kill Americans”, or “all conservatives are white supremacists”, or “all liberals are sexually immoral” – thinking they know these people, despite often never even talking to one.

But in contrast to this modern – and impersonal – approach to knowledge, White suggests that Jesus modeled an approach to *knowing* others instead as a learning process that occurs through relationship. In other words, what Jesus makes apparent is that the way we come to *truly know* people is by entering into relationship with them. And *notably* this includes how we should understand what it means for us to “*know Jesus*”. Unfortunately, Christianity in the West has become heavily influenced by this predominant factoid view of “knowledge” and thus the Church is prone to teach the distorted version of the gospel that salvation that comes from *thinking correctly* about Jesus – that he’s the Son of God and rose from the dead and so on – while the Bible teaches that salvation comes through entering into a spiritual relationship with the risen Lord.^e

Making ‘Right & Wrong’ the Main Thing

But another influence that hinders our ability to love our neighbor is the way our law culture in American society shapes us to always be trying to determine who is right and who is wrong. The English system of law that was brought to America by the original settlers was based on the idea that a person has to be aware they are doing something wrong in order to be found guilty and branded a criminal. So from this perspective the purpose of civil laws is to *inform our conscience* about what is right and wrong. Later on, Teddy Roosevelt would say that a civil society is a society that is legislated, that has laws. In other words, laws make a society civil.^f Well, White points out that that while our law culture is certainly valuable for maintaining some order and civility in society, it has serious side effects on our ability to *relate* with others. As he explains it:

“Law may keep us off each other’s lawns, but it does not teach us how to love our neighbor.” Instead, the American culture inclines us to view people primarily in terms of right and wrong. We then take this into the area of moral law, which makes it increasingly difficult to see the humanity of those we believe are sinning. And this is precisely the point St. Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 8:1,

^c White’s examples of expert delusion: “I’m an expert on gardening because I’ve read multiple blog articles; I’m an expert on mental health because I’ve listened to multiple podcasts; I’m an expert on the incarceration system because I’ve read multiple Twitter threads. At times I’m lured into the lie that I can be an expert on something because I’ve acquired information on a specific matter—low-carb eating, city planning, constitutional law, etc. Peter Senge unpacks our fixation on becoming experts: ‘We secure strength in our social worlds when we are convinced we have more accumulated information in our head than anyone else.’”

^d White: “The direct impact of this information-binging is that it erodes our ability to enter into the experience of another. It tricks our egos into believing that we already know because we are informed.”

^e Adding to the above footnote (b) about Descartes, the evangelical distortion that one can be saved by merely believing facts about Jesus can be traced to Descartes’ view of the human self primarily as thinker.

^f White notes that we even carry the illusion that when something goes wrong, after we find the guilty party, some legislation or policy will prevent the wrong from happening again.

printed in the box in your bulletin.⁹ You see, the Corinthian Christians have been abstaining from the sin of eating food dedicated to idols, but their obedience to this moral law causes them to think themselves *better* than the ‘weak’ who do not abstain. So Paul rebukes them for lacking empathy toward the weak, citing this as an example of “knowledge” of the law puffing them up, when only “love builds up”.

So our sinful condition inclines all of us toward a preoccupation with always trying to determine who is right and who is wrong, toward standing in judgment of others, even though the scriptures reserve this role entirely for God. The Greek root for the word judgment is ‘krino’, meaning “to separate.” So it feels good to do it because separating ourselves from others gives us a false sense of superiority.^h And because our civil law culture in America trains us to view people primarily in terms of right and wrong it only exacerbates this sinful tendency in us. #

The Woman Caught in Adultery

So I’ve just outlined some reasons why as members of 21st century Western Society we may be *especially prone* to create monsters out of others. And perhaps this will allow us to relate the religious leaders in our gospel passage today, who made a monster out of a woman caught in adultery. John writes that early one morning Jesus was in the temple when some scribes & Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and placed her before Him. And in verse 5 they cite the Law of Moses as commanding them to stone such a woman. This reveals they’re viewing her primarily through the lens of right & wrong. And so, seeking to trap Jesus, they ask him to respond. And when he finally does he points out the absurdity of any of human being taking on God’s role of standing in judgment toward their fellow man, saying to them in verse 7, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”ⁱ And hearing this, they went away one by one.

But we should be clear here that Jesus doesn’t deny God’s moral law or its importance.^j In fact, in the final line he will command her to “sin no more”. But his actions also reflect that love and mercy are higher priorities as he treats her with dignity and compassion that indicates her sin doesn’t define her by asking her questions. And instead of asking, “why did you do it?”, he asked, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” And she said, “No one, Lord.” And he said, “Neither do I.”

Now, I tell ya: it’s hard to imagine this woman going home unchanged. But if the religious leaders’ had gotten their way, what good would’ve been accomplished? None at all. And yet, their antagonism – focusing on rights & wrongs – represents the way polarization tends to orient us toward our enemies: leading us to employ shame and coercion and arguments in an attempt to get people over to our side – which rarely, if ever, produces the result we desire.

Creative Disruptions

But have you ever wondered about what Jesus was up to when he twice bent down and wrote something with his finger in the dirt in verses 6 & 8? Many have wondered what Jesus wrote, but

⁹ 1 Corinthians 8:1-3 - *Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ²If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*

^h White: “Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Ethics*, helps us understand that judgmentalism suffers from false seeing. It is a love affair with our own words, expectations, and ideas. You cannot love real and raw people with the judgmental mind, because you’ll always try to control them, fix them, or size them up before you give yourself in love to them.

ⁱ John Calvin observes about verse 7b: doesn’t Jesus seem “to be driving all witnesses away from the witness box and all judges from their bench?”

^j White: “Jesus reasserts the true sense of the law. He does not throw away orthodoxy; He extends its true intent into the soul of this woman. Jesus is faced with the clear, black-and-white command of Scripture, and first chooses mercy.”

maybe that's missing the point. Frederick Bruner suggests its possible Jesus was buying a little time to consider how he should respond, but more likely in verse 6 he wants to avoid looking at the woman, so as to not take part of her shaming. Then, in verse 8 it is her accusers he doesn't want to shame, having just said to them "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" and waiting for each of them to walk away. In other words, first Jesus loves this woman whose accusers have made into a monster and then he remarkably he loves the accusers as well! But what this points to is the value of actions that White calls "creative disruptions" for creating the necessary space and opportunity to love our enemies.^k

In fact, when Jesus is teaching on enemy-love in the Sermon on Mount, he offers some bizarre-sounding advice, such as turning the other cheek. But White suggests these are actually just further examples of creative disruptions that create opportunities for enemy love. Looking at this passage from Matthew 5 I've included in the box in your bulletin ...

- White says it's noteworthy in verse 39 that Jesus specifically says "the right cheek".^l You see, because people used their left hand in those days for bathroom business, it was customary for everyone to use their right hand for everything else.^m Well, slapping or backhanding someone in those days meant treating them as subhuman. But if you responded by offering them your left cheek they would have to look you in the eye and punch you, which was actually *more* dignified: treating you as an equal.
- Or with verse 40ⁿ White explains that when someone sued you for your (tunic) in those days, they were taking everything you had because you couldn't pay your debts. So Jesus says, "Hand over your coat as well." The cloak was the outer garment that was worn like a blanket to keep warm. And if someone sued you for your tunic, your cloak is all you'd be left standing in. So if you're standing there naked for all to see, suddenly your enemy is confronted with the *true reality* of what he's done.
- Then finally with verse 41^o, in Jesus' day Israel was subjected to Roman occupation. And according to Roman law a soldier could command any Jewish man to carry their gun and gear, treating them like an animal. However, the law did limit such conscription to one mile. So imagine how surprised the soldier would be if after one mile they voluntarily kept going another. As White says, they'd be wondering "What's going on?" So "who holds the power now?"

And, of course, the story from last week of White making a gift basket for the acquaintance who'd sent him a nasty email: that was another example of a creative disruption that disarmed an enemy. #

Forgiveness as the Secret Ingredient & Weapon

However, the necessary ingredient required for all of these responses is forgiveness, because that is the only way we will be able to see the image of God in our enemy. You know, we are so used

^k *Some may point to Jesus' "cleansing of the temple" as a disruption of a very different sort than cultivating affection. White's take on that episode is that "Jesus is literally performing. He was not flogging people; the text never states that. He was shooing out the animals with the whip, overturning tables to scatter the doves and coins. This is a public display. There's a vast of difference between attacking one's enemies—which Jesus spoke against—and Jesus' actions in the temple."

White continues, "There is a place for protest; Jesus showed us there was. I wonder though if we have more hope in public outrage. Do we think table-flipping can accomplish more than affection can?... Researchers have found that outrage is more an act of self-expression, to signal our virtues to the public. Psychologically, we outrage more to be seen than to seek substantial change."

^l Matthew 5:39 – "But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

^m There were no southpaws in Jesus' day ☺

ⁿ Matthew 5:40 – "And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."

^o Matthew 5:41 – "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."

to thinking about forgiveness as being weakness or surrendering, but here Jesus is presenting forgiveness as a **secret weapon** in hopes that we'll see that forgiveness is not powerless at all,^p but might actually be the only thing powerful enough to transform our enemy.^q

As White says, "The cultural assumption is that voting is the most effective means by which we make the world a better place." And I'm not saying we shouldn't vote, but scripture seems to indicate that enemy love in the form of creative disruption has much greater potential to effect real change. The difference, of course, is that seeking change through politics doesn't require we love our enemies *at all*, and actually tends to encourage the opposite.

But the picture of enemy love we see in Jesus "gives space for others to be who they are, near us, without judgment."^r Jesus was able to be present with gluttons, drunkards, prostitutes, and tax collectors alike without having any agenda but loving presence and truly enjoying *their* presence. But how can we become capable of such radical living? Well, White suggests it begins with us looking inward and beginning to confront the many aversions to enemy love that rage inside of us. **What keeps us from enemy love are the parts within us that have failed to receive the perfect love of Christ.**^s And apart from allowing God to heal those parts we will not be able to "make space to be still, listen, make eye contact, and enjoy the presence of someone whose moral choices (we) loathe".

^t Instead, our sinful flesh will *insist* that our opinions, our preferences, our way of life must be highlighted and respected. So according to White, "Although the objects of our fears are often external, the real source of our fear is internal. The monster is one's self—at least some aspects of the self."^u

And this leads us to Jonah. #

The Book of Jonah as a Tract for Enemy-Love

^p White compares forgiveness to the form of martial arts known as aikido, which "is a way to fight, with no kicks, no punches. It deals with how to absorb a kick, how to take a punch, redirect energy, go down, and rise up stronger.

Forgiveness is not natural, nor understood intuitively as the claiming of power. Aikido embodies this idea that when we stop meeting something with like-force, we can stop giving it power. We neutralize it, we disrupt it.

^q White notes "Jesus is addressing our instinct to treat enemies like enemies, which only creates enemy-like reactions." He continues, "This reactive posture is certainly cathartic, like a pressure relief valve, but it is not by any means transforming anyone. Leaving the standoff of "Us vs. Them" means shifting from the status of the victim to the one voluntarily pouring out love. This shift is a shift of power. Power does not emanate from someone with the loudest mouth or the biggest sword; it originates from the agency of love ignited by God's Spirit.

^r White: "(Jesus) made space for the glutton, the drunkard, the prostitute, the tax collector, the betrayer to be with Him, and for Him to be with them. He could enjoy their presence as they enjoyed His."

^s Blower: If we desire to do anything but skate over the surface of life, we must experience darkness and weakness, failure and evil... and come to terms with them.

^t White: "Our emotional reactions to people are so rapid that they override every Sunday school lesson we've ever heard about loving our enemies. Thus, the war between fear and love is waged in those in instantaneous flashes of contempt, irritation, anger, or disgust we flood our brains, light up our amygdala, and hijack our good theology before we even have time to imagine a more affectionate way."

^u As Martin Luther King Jr. said in his sermon on this topic in 1957, "In order to love your enemies, you must begin by analyzing self."

You know, despite appearing as one of the smallest books in scripture – clocking in at just 4 chapters – the story of Jonah remains one of the most familiar stories from the Bible to those inside and outside of the Church. However, it may also be one of the most *misunderstood*.

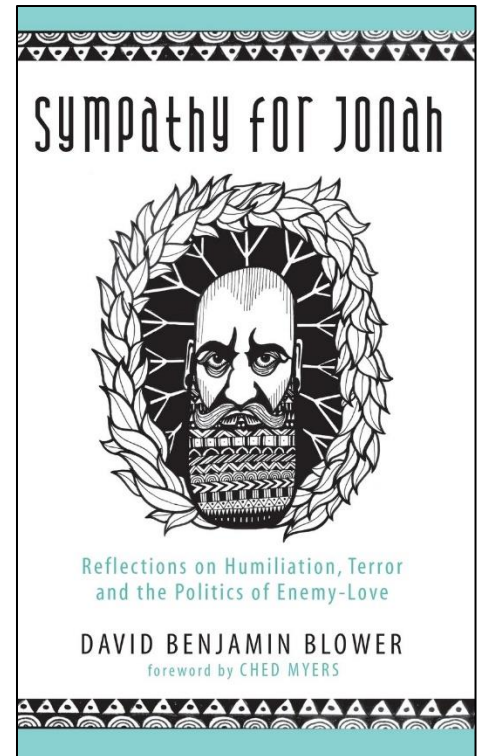
Theologian David Blower^v says the book of Jonah is rightly understood as “a tract about enemy love”. You see, when God calls Jonah, as a prophet, to go to the city of Ninevah “and call out against it”, Ninevah was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, who were known as the Nazis of the ancient world. I’m not sure it would even be appropriate for me to explain the extent of the Assyrians’ brutality, but to give just a few examples: the Assyrians were known for constructing “lavish towers out of the severed heads of their enemies” and for “publicly skinning people alive” among other horrors, and with every battle won it was the king who got to choose “which imaginative horrors the vanquished would be subjected to”.

Prophets like Nahum^w were unrestrained in condemning the Assyrians for their atrocities. But, as Blower says, its one thing to criticize with words from afar, but God was calling Jonah to go to them. And it just so happens, that prior to this Jonah’s job had been to build barriers between the Israelites and these beastly people. You’ll notice in the box in your bulletin a scripture from 2 Kings – that is the only mention of Jonah outside of the book of Jonah – which reports that King Jeroboam (II) of Israel “restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word (God had spoken) by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai.” This is Jonah recommending the expansion of Israel’s northern border with a people called the Arameans because the Arameans were the only thing standing *between* Israel and their greatest threat, who was – you guessed it – the Assyrians!

But now the book of Jonah begins with the Lord was calling him to go to Ninevah – to go in search of the image of God in the Assyrian people – so Jonah runs the other way; he hops on a ship to Spain. Jonah is the only prophet in the Bible who runs from God’s assignment to him, and that’s because God is sending him to his greatest enemy and he wants nothing to do with it.

Well, you know what happens next. God causes such a storm for that ship, which Jonah knows will only be calmed by the mariners throwing him overboard. And we’re told the LORD had “appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (1:17). And finding himself in the belly of this whale not only ends Jonah’s flight from God, but from himself. There, he is left to finally face his hatred for the Assyrians and how terrible it feels for God to call Jonah to love them.^x ##

Well, after Jonah repents, “the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land” (2:10). And after journeying to Ninevah^y, there Jonah calls the Ninevites – the Assyrians – to repent. And this was a disruptive act, revealing that God still loves these people no matter how



^v *Sympathy for Jonah: Reflections on Humiliation, Terror and the Politics of Enemy-Love* by David Benjamin Blower, 2016. Note: this book is only like 60 pages and a very compelling read!!

^w Nahum on Ninevah: “Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder— no end to the prey! The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies! (3:1-3) Also, Zephaniah 2:13,15.

^x **Blower: “The whale’s belly...is the safe place to collapse, to give up and to allow one’s inner structures, defenses, boundaries and coping strategies to be relaxed, or even demolished, so that some new thought can be thought.”

^y It is notable that Ninevah (modern-day Mosul, Iraq) is some 400 miles from a coast.

monstrous they seem. And when word reached their King, the man who had made a hobby out of choosing gruesome ways for his captured opponents to die, he repented and call his people to repent as well.^z And so the Lord decided not to destroy the Assyrians.^{aa}

Well, as White observes, “it was not (Jonah’s) words that wooed the Assyrian tyrant king to repentance and to change his ways. The unexpected power is found in (Jonah’s) going there.” It was his actual *physical presence* – the vulnerability of it – that spoke volumes. And it pointed forward to the Incarnation of Jesus centuries later and the creative disruptions he would teach us about.^{bb} #

Application: The Local Other

The Lord wants to help us to begin imitating him in loving our enemies. And yet, Blower insists that enemy love as an idea is just a clanging gong. It only counts for something when it is actually done. But often what keeps enemy-love in the realm of the theory and talk is that we think of our worst enemies far away. So in order to move into action, Blower challenges us to love the “local other”; to consider who in Oakdale or Stanislaus County represents our enemy?^{cc}

Application: Table Fellowship

So in order to love our enemies we must come toward them.^{dd} But how? Well, one of the primary ways Jesus broke through barriers to make space with enemies was through the sharing of a meal. In Jesus’ day, the meal table is where people separated into their social and political tribes. And eating with those out of your social group was very taboo.^{ee} But Jesus would eat with anyone!^{ff} So perhaps practicing table fellowship with those who differ from us in race, politics, religion, or morals is a way to begin building bridges in this age of divisive culture wars? It pleases me to think about how diverse our congregation is, at least from a standpoint of political views and even some

^z Jonah 3:6-9 - ⁶ *The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.* ⁷ *And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”*

^{aa} Jonah 3:10 - *When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

^{bb} But as remarkable as all of this is, when the Assyrians repent do you remember how Jonah reacts? He is ticked that God forgave them!!

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4:1-3)

As Blower writes, even though Jonah had accepted God’s terrible call, he still cannot accept God’s terrible grace: that God is so merciful he would even extend forgiveness to our worst enemies.

^{cc} *Blower says, “The local enemy is God’s gift to save us all from becoming opinionated bores... It is difficultly to know where to start loving Rupert Murdoch or the militants of ISIS, but all the while the Local Other awaits us, and here we must begin.”

^{dd} White: “Both with the story of Jonah and the story of the Good Samaritan, God is showing us that the void must be reduced for love to spring up between us.”

^{ee} In Greek culture, an economic class system was adhered to. It was legally forbidden to mingle with those outside your economic class.... In first-century Judaism, there was a system of “clean and unclean.” Unless the social groups consisted entirely of Jews who shared a common understanding of purity, sharing a table was out of the question... On top of that, Jews refused to eat with Gentiles and Gentiles refused to eat with Jews—it would be an unacceptable sign of assimilation into each other’s way of life.

^{ff} Even though Psalm 23 famously proclaims in verse 5 that the Lord will “prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies” as a comfort when we feel beaten down that God will put our enemies to shame. But White suggests that Jesus’ ministry deconstructed and moved beyond this to a place of inviting his enemies into table fellowship.

theological views. And I wonder if our sharing together in Holy Communion has played a role in bridging over those differences? #

Application: Compassionate Curiosity

But once we're *at the table* or sharing the same space with an enemy, how should we go about engaging with them?

If the animosity is very close to the surface, this could mean asking a question like "How have I hurt you?" And then giving them the space to respond and listening. We don't tend to like asking questions, because the very act surrenders some level of control.⁹⁹

But when things aren't as raw, the goal still shouldn't merely be small talk. White says, "Spend less time looking for compatibility and more time beholding—looking for story, for pain, for human fragility," because he has found that pain is a universal language, because {quote} "We're all hurting, some of us just pretend we're not."

White calls this approach compassionate curiosity. And he suggests its practice includes

- being interested in the other^{hh},
- being inquisitiveⁱⁱ,
- that we be interpersonal – meaning seek to be present rather than preoccupied with our phone or wishing we were somewhere else –
- and finally that we be indistinct.

And this last one's really had me thinking this week. White observes about Jesus something I'm sure many of us have noticed: that he seemed to have a habit of communicating in ambiguous ways.

First, Jesus was prone to answer a question with a question of his own. Second, he often spoke in parables that he would only explain to his disciples and only if they asked. In fact, White believes "If Jesus were walking the earth today, He might be called elusive, ambiguous, and hard to pin down."

So White suggests that maybe we should take a cue from Jesus and not feel obligated to always engage those who might see the world differently from us so directly all the time. He writes,

"As you are conversing with those you might be polarized with, resist the urge to be clear and combative. Yeah, you heard me right. Is it ever okay to be ambiguous? I believe it is, because Jesus was, quite often. Is it ever okay to come across unclear? I believe it is, because Jesus sometimes was. Is it ever okay to not give a Yes or No to the "is it a sin" question? Yes, because often the history of that question is so convoluted with agendas."

He says, "To be indistinct is to be at peace not being heard, seen, or acknowledged for the opinions I hold." And if anything requires that we feel known and loved by God, it's surely that.

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So I'll close with this: The Lord is calling each us to continue following him down the narrow way, the road less travelled. But to do that will require that we take up our cross and give up our agendas, which are borne of fear, and learn to be a loving presence even with those we may have grown to hate.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁹⁹ White asks, "Why is it not a habit to be curious about each other? Could it be we think we have each other figured out? Could it be that we want control of what's being said?... Curiosity gives away power to another. It is an acknowledgment that we don't know everything. This assumes humility, that we don't already know the motivations that lurk behind other beliefs, statements, or positions within the heart. Curiosity pushes us to more, answers tell us we're done."

^{hh} "Look for peculiar things in people, things unlike us that draw our curiosity."

ⁱⁱ "When you find yourself about to make a statement, turn it into a question. For example, before stating, 'This steak is really good' instead ask, 'What makes this steak really good?'"