

Love Your Enemies
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Matthew 5:38-48
February 20, 2011
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Today's Gospel text is one we all know, but we really don't want to hear. Love your enemies? You've got to be kidding. Who loves their enemies? They wouldn't be enemies if we loved them. I guess that's the point.

It's pretty hard to imagine loving some people: Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, or former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak?

Mubarak has become a household name in the last three weeks, as protestors in Cairo have ousted this "enemy" of the Egyptian people.

The revolution started with youth on Facebook and Twitter. And then it moved to Tahrir Square in Cairo, which was the sight of Egypt's first revolution from a constitutional monarchy to a republic in 1952. After that first revolution, the square was named Tahrir, which means, "liberation." But the Egyptian people did not see themselves as truly liberated in 1952, or since, for Presidents Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and then Hosni Mubarak led one-party states. The Mubarak regime detained and imprisoned activists without trial, denied freedom of the press, and enforced emergency law. The dictator amassed many billions of dollars of personal wealth, while at least 40% of the people have remained very poor. The revolution of 1952 was a revolt by the military—from the top down. The revolution today, on the other hand, is a revolt by the people—from the bottom up.

On January 25th the protests started, and then aided by cell phone cameras, Facebook, and television, the demonstrations grew! One commentator said, "Once the popular will breaches the façade of power in autocratic regimes, they topple quickly," and that's what happened. Now there will be opportunity for a whole new democratic government, providing the military allows new independent political parties and free elections. One party leader said, "If leaders don't think in new ways, there are vacancies for them in museums" (Thomas Friedman, in *Bay Area News Group*, Feb. 13, 2100, A9).

This is a new time for Egypt—and for the Middle East, as ripples send waves of change to Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Libya and Iran.

The remarkable thing is that the Egyptian revolution has been non-violent, with a few exceptions. One news reporter quoted a woman talking about the swell of people in Tahrir Square. She said, "The ground was sprouting human beings!" (Margaret Warner, PBS). It was homegrown people power. Whenever I watched the protesters on the news, they were saying things like "Leave!" "Mubarak, go away!" They were just voicing their demand for change. It was urgent but peaceful. There was a sense of determination, but there was order. And some of the bloggers have written about the personal revolutions that happened in the midst of this amazing political revolution.

An Egyptian Christian woman named Maggie said that a Muslim man was standing next to her in the square, and he said to her, "This is the first time I have heard Christians pray." And another Muslim man in Tahrir, one of the Muslim Brotherhood, said, "I can honestly say that today is the first time that I've ever met a Christian brother. We hugged and kissed and I cried because I've never felt so close to another Egyptian who wants the same things that I do." Another Muslim man fell and hurt himself, and young Christian girls were the first to rush to his aid and give him their own water. He was then so apologetic of what he had always called "Westernized girls in jeans." Stereotypes were breaking down. Maggie wrote that she was standing by a woman and asked her name. It was Nariman. Nariman wore a complete head covering, a *niqab*. And Maggie said she admitted that she had never spoken to a Muslim woman wearing a *niqab*. The sign Nariman held as she stood by Maggie read in Arabic, "Hand in Hand." Christians and Muslims, hand in hand. Stereotypes were breaking down (<http://blog.sojo.net/2011/02/15/tahrir-square-the-many-little-revolutions/>). People came together, hand in hand.

There was another sign in Tahrir Square that read, "We shall Overcome," remembering the protests that drove the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (<http://blog.sojo.net/2011/02/15/democratization-another-mountain-to-climb-in-egypt/>). And we are reminded that this quest for freedom is nothing new,

The Israelite people of the Old Testament had left Egypt where they had been enslaved. And in the laws that God gave Moses for the people, God tells us to be generous. To leave gleanings on the field for the poor, to be good to your neighbor, to be fair and not to slander, not to take vengeance or bear a grudge against anyone, but to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:9-18). These are the laws that keep order and peace in society. The people of Egypt today are asking for such a social order.

And Jesus takes the commandment to a still higher level. Jesus says, "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" (Mt. 5:43-44). The Egyptian people have been in prayer, Christians and Muslims alike. And they have prayed that Mubarak would step down. I think this a kind of love for one's enemy. The Egyptian people have demanded their rights, not out of hatred for an enemy, but out of their own sense of dignity and a newfound unity.

This love of the enemy has happened before. It happened in India when Mahatma Gandhi led the people in peaceful revolution for independence from the British. It happened in the Philippines, when the peaceful and bloodless People Power Revolution of 1986 brought about the ousting of President Marcos and a return to democracy for the country. It happened in Eastern Europe when the Berlin Wall fell and East Germans drove across the border into West Germany, and the ripple effect of democracy moved through the Soviet Republics and the Eastern Block.

Loving our enemy means reframing how we see the world. When we base our international relations on fear and insecurity, we build up our weapons arsenals in defense.

It's a tense balance of power—we call it deterrence. It amounts to fortifying ourselves against our enemies, with all kinds of weapons—conventional, nuclear, biological, and so forth. Some call this keeping the peace. But it's a strategy based on the tactics of war.

Our United Methodist Social Principles say: "We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ. We therefore reject war as an instrument of national foreign policy. We oppose unilateral first/preemptive strike actions and strategies on the part of any government. As disciples of Christ, we are called to love our enemies, seek justice, and serve as reconcilers of conflict. We insist that the first moral duty of all nations is to work together to resolve by peaceful means every dispute that arises between or among them" (<http://www.umcsc.org/PDF/boards/SocialPrinciples.pdf>).

In our church we have a wide spectrum of political views on this subject. Christians espouse different opinions about war. Pacifism is the refusal to participate in any war; some people refuse to participate in some wars, for instance many objected to serve in the Vietnam War, a war never declared by Congress. The Just War theory claims there must be moral justification for war, that the end justifies the means. Many feel World War II was a just war, necessary in order to stop Hitler. A Holy War attitude maintains, "God is on our side." The Crusades were examples of "holy wars." The wars our nation is now waging represent a policy of "redemptive violence," a term used by Walter Wink. The idea is that in Iraq and Afghanistan the use of violence will eradicate terrorists and bring about new democratic governments (John Roth, *Choosing Against War: A Christian View*, 54). The theory is the presence of the military as a peacekeeping force and the use of violence as necessary will be redeeming.

My own position on war and peace is of a pacifist. I would be a conscientious objector rather than serve in the military. I respect others for their decision, however, to support the military and serve their country in that way. I hope all Christians who have backed the United States in recent wars, in the Gulf War, the War in Iraq, and the War in Afghanistan, do so with great humility and regret. Given the sinful nature of humanity, war may be necessary. But certainly war is not something to be proud of. We are to love our enemies.

If we try to follow Jesus, we act with humility. We do not pretend to know it all. We do not imagine that we can ever truly be in control. God is in control, and we should be treating our neighbors as we would have them treat us. If we are honest, I think we will all admit, we often respond to situations in our lives with anger, instead of love. We escalate tensions by wanting to have the last word, instead of listening more. Sometimes we hold on to grudges, and we don't give peace a chance. The way of humility—the way of Christ—need not be passive. We are always called to witness to our faith. That may mean demonstrating for human rights. It may mean speaking out against injustice. It may mean laying down weapons and finding ways to love even those whom we call enemies.

A professor and writer in the Mennonite Church, John Roth, asks the question, "What would Jesus do?" and tells of an experience riding a train in Germany. It was late at night, and John was approaching the end of the line. The train car was nearly empty—he sat alone in the back, and an old man in ragged clothes sat alone in the front. The train stopped and

four rough-looking skinheads got on and, out of the blue, they started kicking the old man with their boots and beating him in the face, while yelling obscenities at him. John couldn't believe what he was seeing—the violence was completely unprovoked. They seemed to be attacking the man just for the heck of it. John felt his anger swell in him. He knew he had to do something. He said a quick prayer asking for some direction from God, and then he got up out of his seat and approached the teenagers surrounding the old man. He shouted to the man in the best German he could come up with, "Hey, Hans, it's great to see you. How many years has it been?" The skinheads were so surprised that they moved aside, and John went right up to the man and embraced him like a long-lost relative. He steered the man away from the teenagers and into a seat on the train. The skinheads looked at each other, bewildered, then, as the train pulled into the next stop, they hopped off the train (John Roth, *Choosing Against War: A Christian View*, 3-9).

John Roth had conquered violence with love. He dared to stand up to injustice. He dared to engage, and then they were "no longer strangers"—

The irony in the recent events in Egypt is that it was "friends" on Facebook that brought about a peaceful revolution, not enemies. The choir's anthem said, "The Spirit binds, our voices blend. No longer strangers, we're sisters, brothers, friends."
("No Longer Strangers," song by Richard Avery and Donald Marsh)