

Homily

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. I would like to share a few thoughts with you regarding enemies and love.

What is an enemy? An enemy is one who deserves strong dislike, someone in whose presence we experience intense displeasure.

An enemy is not someone who annoys us, like a brother or sister. An enemy is not someone who we would rather avoid, like an obnoxious in-law.

An enemy is someone for whom we hold enmity and animosity; deep-seated hatred which is expressed openly.

Jesus had enemies—people who hated him so much that they wanted him dead. There were people who mocked him, spit upon him, beat him and crowned him with thorns. There were people who nailed him to a cross and a person who even jammed a spear into his side when he was dead. These are the people Jesus loved; these people and sinners of every sort. **These are the people Jesus loved.**

If this is the standard, do we even have any enemies? In our lives, there may be backbiters and betrayers. In our lives, we may have a few detractors and rivals and people who take our names in vain. If Jesus calls us to love our enemies, we are surely called to love those who simply annoy us. I fear we hold ourselves to standards that are too low. I fear we too easily exempt ourselves and others from the rule of love.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. In this command, the scriptures record Jesus using the word *agape*. *Agape* is whole-hearted, unconditional, devoted love.

We might believe ourselves to be loving when we tolerate someone unseemly or when we abstain from punching someone we find distasteful. *Agape* is, “An intentional response to promote well-being when responding to that which has generated ill-being.” In the words of Jesus, if someone strikes you in the cheek, not only do you NOT punch back, but you offer the other cheek. If someone sues you, give them what they want and more. If someone asked you for assistance with one thing, offer to help them with three things.

To love our enemies is a tall order; Jesus knew what he was asking, and he would never ask us to do what we cannot do. We have little integrity if we love our enemies and at the same time fail to love those who are near and dear to us, if we fail to love those who annoy us and those who we simply dislike.

I was with a six-year-old nephew over a New Years. During evening prayer, I asked him who he would like to pray for; “Everyone!” he said. Who is it that we ought to love? Everyone.