

Enemies in the Race and at the Table; You Have Got to Love Them

Scripture: Psalms 23 (KJV), Matthew 5:43-48 (NRSV)

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Once upon a time I was on a high school track team. I started out as a pole vaulter. Most of you probably know that a pole vaulter is supposed to soar to magnificent heights. In high school in my day that meant 16 feet or more. My personal best in preseason practice was higher than the top of most of my friends' heads. Since some of the team members were taller than I could vault my coach decided at the last minute to have me run races instead - much to my parent's relief. I am sure the coach's thinking was that it was not worth the risk of me flying through the air on fragile poles known to shatter and maim athletes, when he had high jumpers who could clear the same height without that risk.

My dreams of being an Olympic pole vaulter were shattered. But, I did as the coach wanted and in my first track meet I ran the half-mile without any training. Somehow to everyone's surprise - even my own - I won.

In fact I went on to somehow win a lot of league races that season. Here's how I did it. It's no big secret. I made it a point to stay with the leaders and then I sprinted the last 200 yards leaving the opponents behind. Never looking back. Never worrying about whether they pulled up lame or even made it across the finish line. The opponents were for that day the enemy and my job was to beat them, not to care about where they finished behind me or whether they even finished the race.

I think that in many respects our culture expects us to run through our life like it is a race, always striving to get ahead of the pack, to be the fastest, to finish first in front of everyone else. And frankly for the most part we are not supposed to worry much about those who fall by the wayside, or need help to finish the race, most especially our opponents.

That brings me to Psalm 23, in part that reads "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. . ." Most of us, including many commentary writers, have interpreted this phrase to mean something akin to God setting a feast for us while our opponents - our enemies - who are uninvited to the feast watch on as we, not they, are honored. This reading makes the table like a banquet set for the victors of an athletic event, where as God's elect people we alone get the feast.

Professor Clint McCann during an 8 a.m. class woke me up this Fall with a statement that the 23rd Psalm's reference to God preparing a table in the

presence of enemies could be read another way. What? he asked, happens if we read it to mean that God prepares and calls us to the table with our enemies? After all doesn't Jesus call us to the table with our enemies and to love them?

That's hard stuff to swallow. In-laws and parents and siblings are hard enough to have at the table, let alone to love. But enemies? It's not natural for us to do this, to think this way. Professor McCann, however, argued that The Lord's Supper, like the very one we will hold this morning, is supposed to be a re-enactment of Jesus' open table and grace that we need to practice over and over in order to move away from our nature to want to exclude folks from the table, and instead move towards God's nature as shown through Jesus who Loves and includes all at the table.

The idea of an inclusive table, of all people being God's people, was radical in the Greco-Roman culture that Jesus lived in where meals were meant to be a time and place where, well, everyone knew and took his and her place. Discrimination on the basis of wealth, ethnicity, gender, race, disabilities, social standing and enemies was the norm

The idea of an inclusive table, of all people being God's people, is just as radical today where such discriminations continue.

Of course, Jesus' inclusive table means more than just letting folks we loath in for a meal, it means to love all people simply because, whether yellow, black or white, they are precious in God's sight. In other words, Jesus does not make social distinctions and discriminations about who he is present with, or who he loves.

John Dominic Crossan calls Jesus' radical inclusive ways "open commensality." In his fascinating book *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. Crossan writes: "Open commensality is the symbol and the embodiment of radical egalitarianism, of absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of having any hierarchy among them."

Crossan argues what Jesus' practice of radical egalitarianism exemplifies - and calls us to - is a "just and equal world," something we are still very far from.

In other words when Jesus says "Love your enemies" in Matthew 5:43-48 he really, really means it. Listen carefully to his words: " You have heard 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." Jesus commands this because whether we like it or not God loves our enemies, and we are supposed to too.

Have you ever thought about what would happen if you really loved your enemy? Do you see an irony in that command? I mean, if we love our enemies, don't we

sort of end up with no enemies. That's the magic of Love. Jesus saw no one as an enemy because he Loved them all.

Jesus' acts of inclusion in his lifetime were so powerful that Crossan reasons much of the healing of lepers credited to Jesus has its roots in his healing not so much whatever physically ailed them, but that he took away the pain of their being outcasts from society by accepting them into his fold as equals. Jesus inclusive teachings and practices enacted on earth the very Reign of God, a reign where there is no discrimination.

We see Jesus accepting outcasts time and time again, even with the enemies of Israel. He helps a Roman, a Syro-Phoenician woman, and an arch enemy Samaritan. Jesus brought into his fold, honored and loved all manner of folks: hated tax collectors, poor, wealthy, women, men, ill, lame, insane and enemies.

Every Sunday morning I look forward to the 8:30 services most of all here at Evangelical United Church of Christ because it is then that Katie says on this church's behalf the most open and inclusive invitation to the Lord's supper that I have ever heard in a church. It is a thing of beauty.

All are welcome. It does not matter who you are, where you have been, where you are going or what you believe or don't believe. This church invites every single person to the table. There are no questions asked, no beliefs required, no discrimination. Every Sunday in this room during this service God "prearest a table before [us]" where we invite - on an equal basis - even our enemies to partake. And at that table we have no enemies because we practice loving them in those few precious moments. For a few minutes every Sunday we enact God's Reign right here.

There is much hope in those moments. And when we go home and join the cultural race that pushes us to strive to get ahead of the pack, to be the fastest, to finish first ahead of everyone else in the race, to not worry much about those who fall by the wayside, or need help to finish, we can look forward to next Sunday where we can find respite from that race if only for those precious moments. At this table before us we are saved from the world and our lesser selves, experiencing the promised salvation, if only briefly.

This church's communion service re-enacts Jesus' inclusive table over and over again, and through it we can experience ever so briefly the Reign of God, and we can leave this space and go out into the world remembering the possibilities of focus turned from our way to God's way.

But we need not limit our experiences of God's Reign to our moments of sharing the bread of life and drinking of the cup of blessing with others. Indeed we must not. Jesus calls us to bring God's Reign to the world by loving our enemies and our neighbors, not just on Sunday mornings, but out there, every day, every

moment. This is not an abstract notion. Not only did Jesus prove it could be done by practicing open commensality on a daily basis, but we can do it too.

I will share two ordinary examples of extraordinary love which evidence this can and does work out there in the world.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner reports this war time story in a number of his books:

A light snow was falling and the streets were crowded with people. It was Munich in Nazi Germany. One of [Kushne's rabbinic students had a great-aunt Sussie who] had been riding a city bus home from work when SS storm troopers suddenly stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most were annoyed but a few were terrified. Jews were being told to leave the bus and get into a truck around the corner.

[The rabbinic] student's great-aunt watched from her seat in the rear as the soldiers systematically worked their way down the aisle. She began to tremble, tears streaming down her face. When the man next to her noticed that she was crying he politely asked why.

"I don't have the papers you have. I am a Jew. They're going to take me."

The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. "You stupid [dog]," he roared. "I can't stand being near you!"

The SS men asked what all the yelling was about.

"Damn her," the man shouted angrily. "My wife has forgotten her papers again! I'm so fed up. She always does this!"

The soldiers laughed and moved on.

[The] student said that her great-aunt never saw the man again. She never knew his name.

Jesus said in Matthew: "You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies . . ." Isn't that what this one unnamed stranger on the bus did? And doesn't his act of love toward an enemy still vibrate with the power of the goodness of God even today, even here in this room,?

The other story happened in peace time a few years ago in Seattle, Washington at the Special Olympics. Nine runners assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard race. At the gun they all started out running when one little boy stumbled on

the track, fell, tumbled over a few times and began to cry. The other eight runners heard the boy crying. They slowed down and looked back. Then every one of them stopped, turned around and went back to their fallen opponent. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him saying "This will make it better." The fallen runner got to his feet and then all nine competitors linked arms and walked to the finish line together. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes.

"I say to you, Love your enemies . . ." Isn't that what these Special Olympic runners did? The acts of love they showed toward their opponent still vibrate even today with the power of the goodness of God.

In a few moments we will share the Lord's Supper, at a remarkable table open to all. We do this re-enactment of Jesus' open table and grace to practice over and over a move away from our nature to want to exclude folks from the table, and instead move toward's God's nature as shown through Jesus who includes all at the table. God "preparent [this] table before [us] in the presence of [our] enemies. . ." in hopes that we might learn to love our enemies and act in ways that might also vibrate through the ages with the power of the goodness of God.

Amen.