



Loving Your Enemy, by Brother David Steindl-Rast

To love our enemies does not mean that we suddenly become their friends. If it is our enemies we are to love, they must remain enemies. Unless you have enemies, you cannot love them. And if you have no enemies, I wonder if you have any friends. The moment you choose your friends, their enemies become your own enemies. By having convictions, we make ourselves the enemies of those who oppose these convictions. But let's be sure we agree on what we mean by terms like Friend, Enemy, Hatred, or Love.

The mutual intimacy we share with our best friends is one of the greatest gifts of life, but it is not always given when we call someone a friend. Friendship need not even be mutual. How about organizations like Friends of Our Local Library? Friends of Elephants and of other endangered species? Friendship allows for many degrees of closeness and takes many different forms. What it always implies is active support of those whom we befriend, engagement to help them reach their goals.

With enemies it is the exact opposite. After all, the very word "enemy" comes from the Latin "inimicus", and means simply "not a friend". Of course, not everyone who is not a friend is therefore an enemy. Enemies are opponents "not opponents for play, as in sports or games, but in mutual opposition with us in matters of deep concern. Their goals are opposed to our own highest aspirations. Thus, out of conviction we must actively try to prevent them from reaching their goals. We can do this lovingly, or not" and thus we find ourselves head-on confronted with the possibility to love our enemies.

Love in every one of its forms is a lived "yes" to belonging. I call it a "lived yes", because the very way loving people live and act says loudly and clearly: "Yes, I affirm and respect you and I wish you well. As members of the cosmic family we belong together, and this belonging goes far deeper than anything that can ever divide us." In an upside-down way, a "Yes" to belonging is even present in hatred. While love says this yes joyfully and with fondness, hatred says it grudgingly with animosity, gall. Still, even one who hates acknowledges mutual belonging. Have there not been moments in your life when you couldn't say whether you loved or hated someone close to your heart? This shows that hatred is not the opposite of love. The opposite of love (and of hatred) is indifference.

Loving our enemies is an ideal for human beings of any spiritual tradition. Mahatma Gandhi practiced it no less inspiringly than St. Francis. But it calls to mind the saying of Jesus: “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. 5:43f) And this, in turn, calls to mind what G. K. Chesterton said: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” Difficult, yes, but eminently worth trying, especially in a world torn by enmity.

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