

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” In order to do as Jesus instructs, we need to draw upon his strength. So, let us first look at how Jesus taught us by his words and actions.

Jesus died for our sins. His sacrifice on the cross is his supreme act of love. Nails were driven through his hands and feet, but it was our sins that held Jesus to the cross. To the extent that we turn from God, we may be called enemies, but nevertheless, he offers his Body and Blood for our salvation. Despite the cruelty of the crucifixion, Jesus prays for those who have mistreated him: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34).

Loving one’s enemies begins in the family. When my niece was about 7, she saw a toy in the store and wanted to have it. When her father said no, he became public enemy number one. She pouted, she protested, she pleaded with mother. She had no shame about telling others how mean her father was. My brother took it in stride and continued to love his daughter. He continued to teach her to look beyond herself and to care for others. I remember visiting a little later in life when she had grown and matured. She was thoughtful of others, looked for ways to help others and had long forgotten the doll which seemed so important in the moment.

As we get older, the stakes become a little higher. The decisions one makes have greater consequences and the hurt can sting and burn much longer. This is where we can learn from Jesus and the cross. I recall reading the story of a woman who had been abused by her father. She suffered tremendously at the hands of someone who should have protected her rather than preyed upon her. She experienced healing in her life and despite the setbacks early in life, went on to become a mature and well-rounded person. If there was any enemy in her life, it was her father. He grew older, grew weaker, and unlike a chameleon, had not changed the color of his skin. He still had a sinful propensity to prey upon the weak. The daughter could have turned her back on her father and no one would have faulted her. She chose to love him instead. With the wisdom that came from being a survivor, she made sure her father could not harm or abuse anyone else. In his infirmity, she cared for him. She tended to his wounds. She helped him to die. The strength and courage of the daughter, came because the woman learned from Jesus how to love an enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Had God not helped her to forgive deeply in her heart, she would not have been able to help her father through his illness and death.

Hurt and pain and suffering come from those outside the family as well. Men who make deals with the devil inflict terrible cruelties upon others. As we come upon the 19th anniversary of 9/11, we are reminded of the inhuman acts of the terrorists who took thousands of lives ... claiming to perpetrate evil in the name of a false god of hatred and vengeance.

Some of the first to respond in love and sacrifice to the horrible acts of violence that day were the passengers of United Flight 93. 46 minutes into the flight bound for San Francisco, the hijackers made their move. Alert passengers and flight attendants were aware of the flights that crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Rather than allow a 4th plane to hit its intended target, brave passengers fought back. Near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, they died as martyrs. Instead of hitting the US Capitol and killing thousands more, only the 44 on the plane lost their lives. As we recall the heroic efforts of the passengers, we find no fault in those who responded to evil with sacrifice.¹

In the days, weeks, and months following 9/11 there were countless others willing to put their own lives at risk, to search for survivors, to go into the carnage and to look for any signs of life. They consciously made a choice to sacrifice their own safety and security to respond to evil with compassion and mercy and love. “Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you” (Luke 6:38).

¹ wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Airlines_Flight_93