

Who's your worst enemy? The topic comes up from time to time in gatherings at our place. Some say they have no enemies. Others ask for more time to work on the list. Many just mention the usual suspects: ISIS or the communists. When it's my turn I'll quote Walt Kelly's Pogo and say "We've found the enemy, and it's us." Love is rarely mentioned.

Today's readings describe one of the tougher parts of being a follower of Jesus. If you feel uneasy when you hear these readings, you're not alone. That said, those who study Scripture as historians are certain that Jesus actually did tell us to love our enemies, so if we want to follow Jesus, loving enemies is not negotiable. It might not mean what we think it means, however. Let's take a look and see.

A moment's glance at the crucifix tells us that Jesus walked the talk when it came to loving enemies. Jesus offers in himself the connection between humankind and the divine regardless of whether the invitation's accepted or not. The firm teaching of the Catholic Church is that salvation is open to everyone, including our own worst enemies. Receiving the Eucharist, you and I are asked to pass that invitation along, offering love and being open to the love of others as best we can. The crucifix shows graphically what might be in store for those who choose to follow Jesus like this. It's no wonder that some hold back.

Beyond that, the readings also seem to suggest to some people that Jesus didn't take self-preservation seriously. He actually did, but he saw self-preservation differently than you or I might. Like Abishai in the first reading, your reaction and mine would probably be to take advantage of our enemy's vulnerability and gleefully do him in. But like Jesus later, David saw it differently. He rejected Abishai's offer because he entrusted his self-preservation to God. Although Saul may have chosen to make David his enemy he, David, did not have to make Saul his.

This leads us ask - who makes enemies, anyway? Let me tell you a story. I meet with the men and women of Calix from time to time, as their chaplain. Calix is a group of Catholic folks who struggle with alcohol addiction. As it turns out, alcohol abuse is a very effective way to make enemies.

We were talking about that not too long ago. It was a heart-wrenching exchange. By their own bitter admission, much of what had been lovely and good in their lives had been destroyed by the selfishness and dishonesty that lay behind their addictive behavior. Family and other loved ones had been turned into enemies.

At one point, I gently paraphrased the gospel passage we heard just a moment ago and asked them how it felt to hear Jesus speak like that. It got quiet for a few moments, but then one of the folks said, “Of course we should love our enemies – we made them.”

I pondered that phrase long after the meeting ended. Sure, there are groups of people who’ll never see things our way, but my friend hadn’t been talking about pre-packaged enemies like ISIS and the communists. He was talking about enemies we’d made all by ourselves. The command to love our enemies challenges us to accept our own share of responsibility for the enmity that arose and undo the damage as best we can.

There’s something deeper though, that lies at the heart of our need for redemption and suggests to us the real reason we need to love our enemies. From time to time I give talks to people young and old, and if the situation lends itself for me to do so I’ll ask by a show of hands, “How many of you love yourself?” Most of the time, most of the hands, if not all, stay down. To me, that’s so enormously sad.

The word “enemy” comes from the Latin word *inimicus* which simply means “not a friend.” Someone who doesn’t love you. I asked earlier who your worst enemy was.

Maybe Walt Kelly's Pogo had it right. For the folks in these audiences, and perhaps many here as well, our own worst enemy is ourselves.

But if God loves us, why would we not love ourselves? Loving ourselves as God does isn't about narcissism or egocentricity. It's about being a friend to ourselves; holding ourselves in high regard and always doing the best, most loving thing as our lives unfold; forgiving and asking forgiveness when things go awry. If we sense that we've somehow made ourselves our own worst enemy, then the call to love our enemies cannot be more urgent. Is it time to forgive our worst enemy, ourselves, for all the inelegance that comes with simply being human?

Maybe it's even more serious. The sometimes excruciating suffering I see at St. Francis from time to time makes me wonder if for some people, God is their worst enemy. "How can a good God let this happen to my wife, or child?", "Where was God when I needed God, anyway?" I hear people say angrily through clenched teeth.

In the moment, outbursts like these are perfectly understandable. It's simply how we deal with the strong emotions surrounding staggering losses and trauma. When it's appropriate I'll suggest to people sometimes that they consider forgiving God for making life hard the way it is, bitterly so at times, and for making us as imperfect as we are. Let me be clear: God doesn't need our forgiveness, but we benefit from doing the forgiving. Through it, we can embrace and ultimately accept the stark reality of what it means to be fully human, with all its joy and sadness, its goodness and its evil. In the end, God is no one's enemy.

The deep meaning of the cross and resurrection becomes increasingly clear as we travel along this path. There is no harder work in life, nor any as rewarding or frankly, as crucial. Through it we can begin to accept ourselves, others and God with realistic compassion. In a word, we can begin to love our enemies.