

PRAYING FOR OUR ENEMIES

Not praying for our enemies benefits no one—absolutely no one! Then why don't we pray for them? Perhaps you wonder how I know that we don't pray for our enemies. It's a fair question. I don't know—not for certain. However, I do have one consistent observation based on 65+ years of worshiping in many churches in several denominations. I have not, until the last 3-4 months, found anyone who stated during worship that it was important to pray for our enemies. Most people, when I've asked, do not admit to having an enemy. Those churchgoers who do admit to having an enemy focus on avoiding them. In the worst scenario, however, some are so consumed with a desire for revenge that little else matters.

It's important to be clear about why our “enemies” need our prayers. Regardless of where they come from, they are not born to be enemies. That is learned behavior. A child learns, both at home and in the world at large, what to fear and who the enemy is. A child's growing sense of who are the safe people and who are the not safe people to be near can be formed early in life. A simple definition of an enemy is one who is not safe to be near for whatever reason.

Once we decide that a person, a group or even an entire nation is not safe to be near, we don't just walk away. We still are responsible for how we treat the person, group or nation that threatens us. I was taught to fight back at anyone who was an enemy at the age of 9.

Later in life, after I had developed the verbal skills to confront issues or people with whom I disagreed, I didn't confront the message I had learned about fighting at age 9. Part of me knew that words can hurt more deeply than a physical attack. Conversely, I needed to learn that words, such as those we use in prayer, can do much good for the inner healing of souls—my own included.

Later, as a chaplain at a Department of Veterans Affairs Hospital, I discovered that a lot of combat veterans developed intense anxiety over whether they were justified in killing the people of Southeast Asia—especially in Vietnam. How could they (the Vietnamese people and others) be “the Enemy”? It just didn't make sense that such a tiny nation could pose a real threat to this country.



We need to be cautious about labeling anyone as an enemy. It not only creates an adversarial situation. It also places a spiritual burden on us to care about their well-being. We can't just ignore them. Nor do we have God's permission to retaliate when we are threatened, attacked or denied a right. St. Augustine, a bishop in the 5th century, developed a seven-part test of whether retaliating on the scale of starting a war is justified in a specific situation. It can be a useful guide for how we respond to conflicts within the Church as well.

Let's apply just one of Augustine's tests to the Church. It's the principle that says, "The ultimate goal of a just war is to establish peace."¹ Do we have conflicts in church that lead to people labeling each other as the enemy? Oh, yes. And it gets worse the more history that we read about how the Church has often mistreated people. Making peace and restoring justice within the Church itself is often not our first goal. Being right or being in control often is.

Staying focused on the mission of the Church (UMC: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world") is difficult but absolutely vital. To expect that we won't encounter opposition in doing what we are called as Christians to do is optimistic but not realistic. However, we are not justified in seeking revenge on any one or any group who disagree with our mission or our beliefs even when they block our efforts to share God's Word. Instead, we are called to pray for them.

The United Methodist Church and all Christians risk alienating each other when we attack those with whom we disagree. We use energy that is, to be quite frank, needed in developing a Church culture that is open, respectful and loving of all people.

There are several stories in the Scriptures that demonstrate how being or having an "enemy," including being judgmental, can lead to irreversible consequences. We don't have to look beyond the first few pages of the Bible to find dramatic evidence that being an enemy or having an enemy can lead to unexpected disaster— even murder within a family. When Cain killed his brother Abel ([Genesis 4:1-16](#)) he demonstrated the level of enmity that can develop in a family that does not pray for its enemies." We cannot allow our differences to drive us apart!

One outcome of our tendency to judge others is the outright refusal of several denominations to share Communion with non-members. A Jesuit colleague was once asked if we (Protestants), who are not supposed to receive Communion in a Catholic church, might find greater openness to God's grace if we shared Communion with each other (ecumenically) first. His response was that we must agree on the doctrine of exactly what Communion is before we share this sacrament. Nor is the problem confined to a single denomination. Thankfully, it has not been a problem at Campbell UMC, where I worship.

Jesus told us to love each other, and that includes every "enemy" we have. Jesus did not say that we are simply to be nice to them. We are called to love our enemy enough to pray for them ([Matthew 5:43-48](#)). When we don't pray for our enemy's needs it makes it difficult to care for them as persons and groups equally loved by God.

The truth is that none of us deserve, on our own merits, to belong to God's family. Yet God has acted in Jesus the Christ to show us that we do. Only God can change our hearts enough to make it possible to believe this. The Good News is that God's grace makes it possible to believe that we are all members of God's family.

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¹ Principles of the Just War, <http://mtholyoke.edu/acad/intre1/poll16/justwar.htm>