



FIRST PREZ HONOLULU
SERMON TEXT

**“Loving Your Enemies”
(TOGETHER Sermon Series) by Tim Shaw
Sunday, May 26, 2024**

Good Morning, I'm Tim Shaw, one of the pastors on staff here at First Prez. It's great to see you this morning.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember the sacrifices made by the men and women who have served our country from the very beginning of our nation to this day. We have this opportunity to worship God in freedom and so much more because they gave their lives in the service of freedom. So, we give thanks for them this weekend.

Before I jump into today's passage from the Sermon on the Mount, I want to give you a heads up that your leaders are excited to share with you some really important developments.

Starting next Sunday, June 2, we'll be taking a month-long break from our study of the Sermon on the Mount and will be launching a five-week Foundations sermon series. Next Sunday we'll share our newly refreshed and renewed mission statement - this is the statement that tells us who we are and what lives at the core of our life together. On the following four Sundays, we'll be sharing our renewed values that will shape and guide how we live out our mission over the next five and a half years. So, you don't want to miss the messages in June.

This morning we're wrapping up our study of this section of the Sermon on the Mount - Jesus' greatest sermon. We've called this 8-part series TOGETHER because Jesus has been focusing our attention on how we are to live in relationship with the people in our lives.

What do we do when we're angry with someone or when we feel tempted to look lustfully at another person or when we are mistreated? These have been super challenging and, I'd say, super helpful discussions for us to have. They have not been easy discussions but they have been really helpful. Thanks to Pastor Tim Fearer for his excellent leadership in the pulpit each Sunday morning and for the tremendous leadership he is providing throughout our church. He is a gift from God to us.

After all that Jesus has said about the characteristics of a person who is being transformed by the gospel, after all that He has said about being an influence for good in the world, and after all that He has said about how we live in relationship with other people in our lives, He makes this stunning statement: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)

What? How is that possible? “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus simply says that our Heavenly Father is our example, and we are called to be like Him in the world. I think that is going to require some explaining.

One of things Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount is painting a picture of what it would look like to truly live as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

This is what it looks like when Jesus transforms us and we start living more and more like He would. In today's passage, Jesus lays out an enormous challenge for all of us. What's really interesting to me about this challenge is that I think it gathers up all that we've been learning so far in the Blessed and Together sermon series. This challenge captures what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. Here's how Jesus wraps up this section of His sermon on our life together.

Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

When Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said," He's talking about what people were saying in His day. To the best of my knowledge, there is no place in the Bible where we are instructed to hate our enemies. There are certainly passages of Scripture where people express their distrust, anger, and even hatred for those who threaten and oppose them. But we are never instructed to harbor hate in our hearts for others.

From personal experience, I think all of us know how destructive it can be to nurture, feed, and stoke hatred in our hearts. When we do that, there

is a terrible, destructive impact, not only on the person who is the object of our hatred but on ourselves as well.

Hatred for an enemy is understandable. I get it. But Jesus has another way, and it is a remarkably, unexpected, counter-intuitive, gospel informed and Holy Spirit empowered way: "Love your enemies and pray for those who are persecuting you." That was a shocking statement for those who first heard Him say it, and I think it's pretty safe to say that some of us are a little shocked with that statement right now.

Somehow I am to love my enemies. How is that possible? How am I going to do that when I sometimes find it incredibly challenging to love people who simply bug me? If Jesus had said, "Love those who irritate you and sometimes drive you crazy," that would have been challenging enough for me, and yet Jesus says that I am to love those who are my enemies. How is this possible? Well, apparently it is.

Mark Labberton is a good friend of mine. He recently retired as President of Fuller Theological Seminary. Mark was also the former senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley. Mark and I worked together in that church for over 20 years.

I love the story about Doris Kraft that Mark tells in the opening chapter of his book *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor*. I also love the title of that book. Loving your neighbor is a dangerous act and loving your enemies is as well.

I knew Doris Kraft. She was a remarkable disciple of Jesus, who worked, for a time at First Pres

Berkeley, staffing the front office. Some of you have heard me tell this story in the past but this story is so good and will be so helpful for all of us as we think about what it looks like to love our enemies that I am going to read it to. So, sit back. I'm going to walk us through what happened to Doris and also let Mark tell the story himself.

Here's what Mark wrote about Doris when he went to visit her on the day she was mugged across the street from the church in Berkeley.

Doris called Mark and told him that she would have had the muffins at the church on time, but she wasn't able to do that because she had been kidnapped!

Here's what happened. That morning, Doris had parked her car in her usual spot next to the church and as she was reaching back inside her car for her basket of oatmeal muffins she was struck from behind and pushed back into the car and across the console into the passenger seat. A young man jumped into the driver's seat and took off, with Doris riding shotgun. Doris was in her early eighties, and had just had her silver-blond hair done. Doris was an elegant lady.

When Mark heard this news, he headed for Doris' apartment. Listen to what Mark writes, "I made my way straight from church to her tidy apartment. Shaken but steady, Doris greeted me at the door. Every protective pastoral corpuscle was firing in me as I leaped at the chance to surround Doris with love and support in the midst of this trauma. But that day, as other times too, Doris proved to be my pastor more than I could be hers.

So, Doris tells Mark what happened. "After he took off in the car, the first thing I did, of course, was to ask him his name." Mark says that he made a mental note: "When mugged and kidnapped, start by asking for your attacker's name."

"He said it was Jesse. So I said, 'Jesse, what are you doing?' "I'm kidnapping you so we can go to your ATM and get money out of your account." So I said, 'Jesse, why are you doing this?' "He told me it was because he needed the money for drugs. He was addicted and needed a hit. So Doris said to him, 'Well, Jesse, it's a terrible thing to be a drug addict. You really shouldn't be a drug addict. It's not the way you should be living your life.' "

By then they had arrived at the first ATM machine, and after intimidating her for the password, Jesse jumped out to get the cash. As he sped away to the next branch, Doris said she explained to Jesse that he really needed help, that this drug problem was much bigger than he was. He needed help from God, who really loved and understood him. After their stop at the next branch of the bank, Doris told Jesse he also needed an effective drug rehab program. Jesse replied he had tried that, but Doris suggested he needed a better program than the one he described to her. Then Doris said this, "Jesse, God wants to help you." By the third bank stop, Jesse had hit the daily withdrawal limit for Doris's account. Since she was no longer useful to him, he pulled the car to the side of the street and explained he was going to leave her there. He had what he needed. But Doris was not done.

"Jesse, I am going to pray that you get caught for this, because it's wrong and you shouldn't get away with doing this to people. I'm also going to pray that you will be caught so I can not only testify you

did it, but so I can plead with the judge to get you into a really good drug rehab program. You need to get caught, so you can be stopped and helped. You need God to give you the strength to get off drugs and have a better life.” What? Mark commented, “Yep, I’m sure I would have said something just like this to a kidnapper.”

Jesse was just going to leave me there, but I couldn’t get out of the car because I was so battered and stiff. So Jesse said he would come around to the other side and help me, which I really appreciated. He came around, opened the door, helped me out, held my arm so I could get to the driver’s side and then gave me his arm so I could get into the car. Then he put the seatbelt across me, leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. “So that’s what happened.”

I’m going to finish the story in a minute but here’s what I’d like you to do. Turn to someone sitting next to you and share your reaction to what you’ve heard so far in Doris’ story.

OK. Here’s how this amazing story ends. As Mark tries to process what he’s just heard, he writes, “Pastoral adrenaline still rushing, I leaned toward her and with all the empathy I could exude, I said, “I am so sorry this horrible thing happened, Doris.” She agreed, “Yes, it’s true, it is horrible,” But then, without much of a pause, she added, “But the really horrible thing is Jesse’s addiction to drugs.” “But it’s awful that you should get attacked and kidnapped like this.” “Well, yes, but really, why not me?” asked Doris. “This sort of thing happens every day to thousands of people. There’s no particular reason this shouldn’t happen to me.” When Doris finally said, “Let’s pray for my getting over this, but also for Jesse,” Mark said, “I was thinking that I was

also in need of prayer as I tried to absorb this conversation.”

Now, let’s listen to how Mark wraps up this remarkable story. It wasn’t a great surprise that within a couple of months, Doris was at the police station identifying Jesse. Soon after that, she sat in the witness box at the courthouse: “Yes, hello, Jesse, remember me? Doris? I said I was going to pray for this moment and I told you why. Here we are! Yes, Judge, Jesse was the one, and yes, he did do all those things. And, another thing, Judge, Jesse really needs a good drug rehab program so he can get his life back. I know he’s guilty. But he also really needs help, please, Judge, would you find some way to get him the help he needs?”

Want to know what it looks like to love your enemy? That’s what it looks like. Doris loved her enemy without hesitating. She did not let herself be consumed with a sense of victimhood, though it is absolutely true that she had been terribly mistreated. Doris was courageous and honest. She was not in denial. She was willing and able to step toward her enemy with truth and justice, to seek what was best for his welfare without disregarding her own.

Mark concludes, “Everything in Doris believed her God was God for Jesse, too. The same love God extended to her was also for him. God’s heart seeks the welfare of his enemies, so hers did too.”

Well, I think we could use a coffee break right about now. Wow! I need to sit down and have a long think about that.

In His greatest of all sermons Jesus says, “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, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Because, this is what your Heavenly Father is like. This statement still stuns me even though I've just seen, once again, that it IS actually possible for a person to love their enemy when Jesus Christ is alive in a person. Right here at the end of the section about how we are to live together, Jesus challenges us to love our enemies because He apparently believes that is possible. And evidently, it is.

I could be wrong about this, but I am not aware of anyone who considers me their enemy. If you'd like to clear that up and set the record straight and reveal that we have a problem, please do so. I don't consider anyone in my life to be my enemy. I am deeply grateful to God for that. I DO have people in my life who I disagree with, who I find difficult to be with sometimes. Even though they may not be my enemy, this passage of Scripture tells me that I need to love them in the midst of our disagreements and pray for them (as I pray for myself).

So, how do we learn to love our enemies? First, by looking at what God Himself does with His enemies. Let's reread Matthew 5 verses 44-45.

⁴⁴ *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵ *so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

God pours out His blessings on the evil and the good. The sun shines on the home of the good person and on the home of the evil person. God

sends His rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. Our God is an enemy-loving God. And, you know what? That is really good news for you and me. It is a really good thing that our God is an enemy-loving God because I, too, once was His enemy. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:8 – *"God proves His love for us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Our God is a God who loves His enemies and that is the kind of person He intends to make us to be. God wants to restore and heal the brokenness that is deep in our lives and He wants to transform that brokenness into something beautiful. And that transformation happens as I recognize who our God is and get to know Him personally. Our God loved me while I was still His foe and He loves me still now that I am His friend.

Danielle Strickland spoke recently at the national gathering of the Exponential Movement - a movement focused on making disciples of Christ who can make other disciples of Jesus. Danielle talked about an experience she had on a recent trip to Rwanda. That nation went through a terrible genocide in 1994. Nearly 1 million people were killed by their fellow citizens in the span of a few months.

I've been to Rwanda six or seven times and every time I take a group of people to Rwanda and on to the Democratic Republic of Congo, we make a stop in Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda, and we visit the genocide memorial. This memorial is part museum and part cemetery. Two-hundred-fifty thousand people who were killed during the madness that broke out in 1994 are buried in mass graves on the grounds of the memorial.

Danielle Strickland painfully points out in her talk that the Sunday before the violence broke out, 80% of all Rwandans were in church. Let that sink in for a moment. What happened later that week was Christian on Christian violence and in some cases the church itself was complicit. Churches rang their bells, encouraging people to come and take shelter in the church. And when they did, the doors were locked and all who had come seeking safety were killed.

In her talk, Danielle spoke about a pastor she met on her trip to Rwanda. He and his family had survived the genocide, but he told Danielle that his faith almost did not survive and his calling to be a pastor in the church was destroyed. He wanted nothing to do with the church after what he had seen.

Danielle met this pastor in one of the so-called “Transformation Villages” in Rwanda. These are communities where victims of the genocide live side-by-side with those who perpetrated the violence. This pastor, who had been so devastated, was now beaming with excitement about the future of the church in Rwanda. And the main reason he was excited was because he had met Jesus in a profound way and had a life transforming encounter with God.

The pastor introduced Danielle to a woman by the name of Grace who was living in this Transformation Village. Her entire family had been killed during the genocide. After that happened, Grace said that she had no idea how she could go on. She suffered from deep depression. All she wanted to do was die. Grace said that she had no source of comfort until she met this pastor. He told

her that he knew of only one source of comfort that could help her and that one source was Jesus. Grace met Jesus Christ, and she received His love in such a deep and profound way that she began to want to live. The love of Christ began to heal her, restore her, and transform her. Jesus touched the profound needs in her life so deeply that she not only wanted to live, she began to long to forgive those who had hurt her so badly.

Grace then introduced Danielle to the man who was sitting next to her - a man by the name of John. John was the person who had massacred her family. John then told his story and how one day he met this same pastor while he was in prison. John told Danielle that the day after when he woke up, he could not even look himself in the mirror. He was so disgusted by what he had done to Grace's family. All he wanted to do was die. Everyday in prison, John looked for a way to end his own life. He could not imagine being able to live with the shame of what he had done.

But then this pastor told him about a source of power that could redeem even the unredeemable and forgive what seemed unforgivable. The pastor told John that Jesus was ready to address his shame and remove it.

John received Jesus and he, too, began to want to live and to not just live but to make right, if at all possible, what he had gotten so wrong. John began to cry as he told his story to Danielle and as he did, Grace reached out and placed her hand on John's and reaffirmed that he was her brother and Jesus loved him.

What? How is this possible? Those are the questions Danielle asked the day she heard these

stories. She was hearing the words, she was witnessing before her very eyes what seemed like real reconciliation between Grace and John, and she could not figure out how this was possible. So, Danielle pleads with Grace, “Tell me how this is possible! How is this happening?” And Grace looked at Danielle and said, “Oh, oh, do you not know Jesus?”

“Do you not know Jesus?”

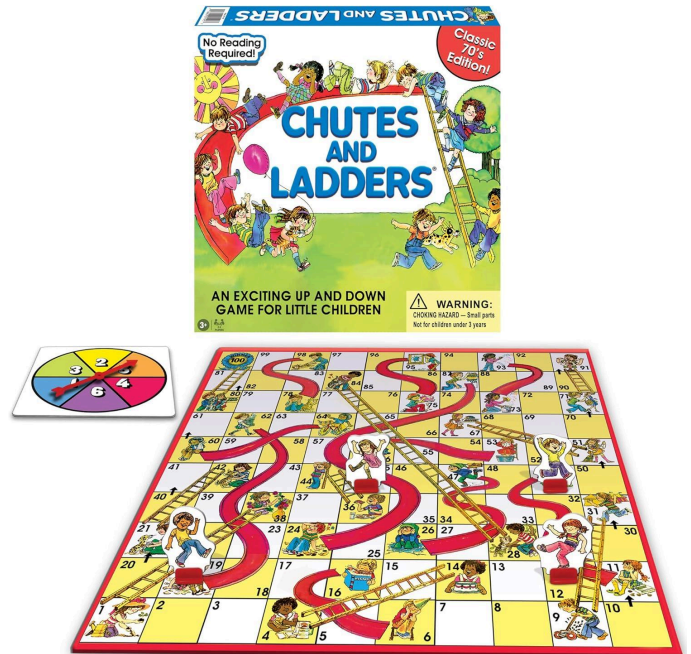
It feels like we might need another break. If we know Jesus, if we know His love for us, if we are being healed by Jesus, if we have the Spirit of Jesus living within us, it is apparently possible to love others, even our enemies.

So, where do we begin to show love to our enemies? Jesus says, we begin in prayer. Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies, to pray for those who are making trouble for us or who have made life difficult for us. We are to pray for those who are persecuting us, pray for those who are bullying us. Pray for them. Because praying for them reflects that the heart of God is being formed in us. And actually, by praying for them the heart of Christ will be more deeply formed in you and me. It is hard to hate someone when you begin to pray for them. God pours out His blessings on the evil and the good. We are called to be people who generously bless others.

It's easy to love those who are like us, who are similar to us, who have the same convictions we have. Yes, please keep loving and blessing and encouraging them. But Jesus is challenging us. Be willing to go further. Love the irritating. Love the one who has different beliefs and convictions. Love those who might be in opposition to you. Become

more like Jesus. And here's the great challenge, “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.”

One of the board games I liked to play as a kid was called Chutes and Ladders. Do you know this kids' game?



As you can see in this picture of the game board, there is a long, winding path you have to follow. When you land on a square that has a ladder on it, you are able to climb up to a space further along the path. But there are also chutes. These are big slides. When you land on a square with a chute you are forced to slide down the chute to a square earlier along the path.

Matthew 5:48, “*Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect,*” is a verse with a chute in it that sends us all the way back to the first Beatitude — “*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.*” (Matthew 5:3)

Again and again in the Sermon on the Mount, we will need to go back to the beginning of Jesus' sermon, and remember that it is our utter poverty of spirit, our complete inability to help ourselves that opens us up to the deep work of transformation that God wants to do in you and me. I can't be perfect in my own efforts. But Jesus wants to restore and transform me more and more into His image.

You and I need to be filled up by God's Holy Spirit to be able to love our enemies. We need to be experiencing the deep healing and restoration that God wants to do in us. We need to be transformed from the inside out. And we can only experience that when we are on a pathway of discipleship, when we become an apprentice to Jesus.

The Apostle John wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another." (1 John 4:7) The fact that you are loved by God must always come first as we seek to love others. We need to remember and know that we are loved. We need to have God meet our deep needs for healing in our lives. We need to know that we are loved and we need to experience that love. That is the foundation of our ability to love others, including our enemies. And the good news is that God wants to meet those deep needs.

If we hope to be able to love others, especially our enemies, we need to know that we are loved by God. And that's not just intellectual knowledge but a knowing that comes from personally experiencing the love of Jesus. And you know what, as we grow in our knowledge of God's love, as we pray for our enemies, we will discover more of God's love for us and for others. We need to know that we are beloved so we can love others, including our enemies.

I have some spiritual steps for you this week. They're in your bulletin and on the screen. This is our homework for the week.

SPIRITUAL STEPS OF THE WEEK:

- Is there anyone in your life that you consider an enemy?
- Reflect on how you think this conflict developed?
- Set aside some time this week to pray each day for the other person and for yourself, listening for God's voice.
- What would a step of love look like?