

Love in a Time of Enmity, Dissolution, and Division

If anything can be said to express the core Christian ethic, surely it is love. Traditionally, following the apostle Paul, the three central Christian virtues are faith, hope, and love – and, in Paul’s words, “the greatest of these is love.”

Jesus taught that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. This, along with love of God, constitutes the preeminent moral requirement of Christian teaching. Moreover, Jesus also taught that we are to love our enemies. No ifs, ands, or buts.

In the current context, it might be instructive to ask what it means to love those who are perceived as enemies, or those who are not “us” but “them.” In particular, we could think about the alien, the refugee, the immigrant, the stranger, the person of another color or religion, the person who looks or talks or smells different.

However, it is also proving a challenge to love those with whom we have fundamental differences not based on accidents of birth, genetic inheritance, or country or culture of origin. They are differences in point of view, in moral values, in political and social affiliation and identity. How do we love those whom we perceive to be in the wrong? How do we love those whom we perceive to be a threat to our way of life? How do we love those who appear to be enemies by choice, not by circumstance?

These are big questions, too big to answer fully here. But some basic principles can guide us.

I make a concerted effort – and it takes effort! – not to resort to name-calling regarding those with whom I am profoundly at odds.

I try to be civil, never forgetting that the other person – however wrong or misguided – is a human being, cherished in the eyes of God.

I try to focus any criticism of others on their actions, their words, their values, their evident intentions, rather than on their persons.

Love obliges us to temper our judgments, acknowledging that we, too, may be in the wrong. But love does not oblige us to withhold all criticism or indignation toward those we judge to present a clear and present danger.

Thus I think it is only fitting to call certain attitudes and actions racist when they exhibit a prejudicial disposition toward persons of a particular ethnic or racial group. And it is appropriate to call those persons racist who consistently express such attitudes and actions. Loving the neighbor or the enemy does not mean overlooking the ugliness of that neighbor’s or enemy’s attitudes and actions.

Moreover, it is fitting to speak harshly against the attitudes and actions of others when great harms are being inflicted upon any segment of our society or any beneficial features of our way

of life. The fact is, ordinary human beings are capable of enormous evil, whether we know it or not (perhaps especially if we don't know it). Such evil must be confronted, and those responsible held to account.

Some contemporary calls for civility in our fractured political discourse are appropriate, but others are misguided. The elephants in the room must be identified and called out: racism, bigotry, hatred, pride, venality, cowardice, greed, dishonesty, lust for power. We need to name and know what we are up against. Neither love nor civility requires cordiality toward the evils in our midst. Nor do they require that we treat those who are complicit in these evils as merely innocent and unwitting instruments and/or victims of wrong-doing.

We must now speak truth to power, forcefully, critically, passionately, precisely on behalf of whom and what we love.

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