

There's an old Charles Schulz Peanuts cartoon that has Lucy chasing Charlie Brown around the house yelling, "I'll get you, Charlie Brown!" Suddenly Charlie stops, and Lucy comes to a screeching halt. Charlie says to her, "If we, who are children, cannot forgive one another, how can we expect our parents, who are adults, to forgive one another, and in turn, how can the world ...?" At that point, Lucy punches Charlie Brown in the nose, knocking him down. The last frame has Lucy explaining to a friend, "I had to do it ... He was beginning to make sense." In some ways, I feel a bit like Charlie Brown in trying to address this particular passage of scripture. Most of the time, the passages fit our sensibilities, but I'm not sure this one does that easily. Actually, it is asking an almost impossible thing from us, and that's what makes it so hard to consider. Our response to what Jesus said could well be, "You want me to do what? Love my enemy?!"

If we look more closely at the passage, and most of all at the commandment to love our enemies, perhaps we can come to some new understanding of what Jesus might have meant. Many of us wrestle with our perspectives and attitudes and with how our faith is relevant and comes to bear on this issue. In theory, loving our enemies sounds ideal, but it's hard to imagine being filled with love when we look into the face of someone who murdered a friend or family member, or some person or group or nation who has caused us pain and heartache. Loving our enemy is a difficult undertaking. I've discovered that it's an easy thing to spout platitudes like that from the pulpit, but it's a tough thing to live them out in our everyday lives.

That's a dilemma many of us face, and, as people of faith, I think it's one with which we need to struggle, since I doubt that many of us see the matter as clearly defined. As people of faith, we have to wrestle with how to deal with our enemies and how we live out the commandment to love them. Jesus says we are to love our enemies, but first we must determine who that is. Who is the enemy? In the Gospel passage, the enemy is understood to be the non-Israelite, anyone who might be different. If each of us took a moment to stop and think about it, we might well be able to conjure up in our minds the ones we would call "enemy." Perhaps the enemy is not someone as far away as a foreign leader or a hostile people. In a Bible study group, the participants were discussing this same passage, and the leader asked those in the group to think of the person toward whom they felt the most hostility. Suddenly, a woman in the group gasped and said, "It's my husband!" It took her by surprise that one she loved was also one she could call enemy, and that he could be so close at hand. Who are our enemies, the ones who are the nemesis in our lives? Perhaps it's a colleague who's irritable or power-hungry or self-aggrandising. Maybe it's a boss who's demanding, insensitive, unreasonable, or it might be an ex-spouse whose presence fills us with hatred and bitterness. It could be a former business associate who acted unethically and caused the business to fail.

Maybe it's someone who maligned us or treated us unfairly. It could be someone we find difficult to deal with, someone who brings out the worst in us, causing us to feel negative or angry. Whoever it is, one thing is for sure — Jesus mentioned enemies because he assumed we would have some. He was addressing a situation in which most of us find ourselves at one time or another.

Given that, why would Jesus, knowing how it is for us, tell us to do something like loving our enemy? I believe Jesus said what he did because he understood our human nature all too well, and he knew that our first tendency is to want revenge. We are filled with anger and resentment, and we want to get back at the one who hurts us. That we are very unwilling to let

go of the love of power in favour of the power of love whether we are the perpetrator or the victim.

Now granted, there are times when anger is appropriate and justified, and when it is creative and brings about change. The story of Jesus in the Temple upsetting the tables of the money-changers is often cited as an example of this. Jesus was rightly angry because the moneychangers were cheating others and taking advantage of them. He was angry at immoral actions. Anger is often the normal human response, but the problem occurs when we hold onto our anger, and that's what Jesus understood. That's why he reminds us once again that love is the better way. It's the better way to live with ourselves and with others, and it's the better way to deal with our enemies because it ultimately results in good, and not something destructive. Jesus wants us to have lives of wholeness and healing, and he promotes positive relationships to further that end.

Perhaps it is akin to the kind of love a parent has for a child. As parents, we care about our children and their well-being. Consequently, we try to raise them lovingly, but that love is not permissive love. We don't condone every action, and we teach our children the repercussions of their acts. We don't allow them to touch a hot stove because they might get burned. We teach them to be responsible drivers so they won't harm themselves or others. Love does not mean that anything goes.

As people of faith, we must wrestle with this tough issue, and we must begin today. Our fervent prayer must be for God's love to permeate our hearts and lessen the hardness we feel toward others. We need to pray to be able to love those we call our enemies. I heard a story a long time ago about the life-changing power of love. A company of soldiers had travelled from Malta to Egypt, and everyone was ready to turn in for the night. They were all wet and muddy from the rain, and thoroughly exhausted. One young private quietly knelt beside his bed to pray, but his sergeant took offence to this display of faith, and reached for one of his boots. He hit the private on the side of his head with that rain-soaked boot, and then he took the other boot and hit him on the other side of his face.

The soldier's face stung from the pain, as well as from the humiliation, and after the sergeant went to sleep, the soldier paid him back. When the sergeant awoke the next morning, he found his boots beautifully polished and standing neatly beside his bed. As that crusty sergeant told this story later, he said that the private's reply to him had challenged his whole way of doing business. He confessed that he had run up against the power of love, and he had been different ever since.

That's what the power of God's love can do, and that's why we must pray for God's loving touch to soften our hearts. Jesus' admonition to love our enemies is a tough one, but that's exactly what he wants us to do, and we need to begin right this moment.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that you and I are willing to let go of the love of power in favour of the power of love. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton