

February 23, 2014
"Now For The Hard Part"
Matthew 5:38-48
Pastor Puls, Senior Pastor

Have you ever had a neighbor who was hard to love? My wife and I have wonderful neighbors, up in our Ashton Meadows development in Franklinton; but not everybody is so fortunate.

Here's a neighbor who's evidently having a conflict over a fence. "Look, Bob, I've painted my fence," he wrote. Then there's this guy, who left a note on his neighbor's apartment door. "Hey, Did you guys move? Your wi-fi isn't working anymore. Hope you're ok." And here's another note, left by a neighbor who won a gold medal for sarcasm. "Dear neighbor, you car's sound system is amazing. It is so loud and the bass is so rockin' that it actually shakes all of the apartment buildings in the complex. Awesome! This is exceptionally rad when you pull up at 3:30 in the morning and wake up the entire community. Wicked awesome! We are all very impressed with your super cool sound system. Don't even think about turning it down when you pull up to the buildings you share with hundreds of other people. Your Envious Neighbors."

I remember a couple who lived on my street up in New York. They started painting their house a dark burgundy color. Their neighbors complained, unhappy with their color choice. So they got rid of the burgundy paint, and painted their house bright purple, with hot pink trim, and left it that way -- just to annoy their neighbors -- for about five years.

The Bible says, "Love your neighbor." And, as hard as it can be sometimes for us to do that, God is serious about this. He wants us to establish connections and relationships with our

neighbors, to communicate with those around us. God expects us to be tolerant, caring, approachable. Why? Because the Lord sees our neighbors not just as people who live near us and who happen to impact our quality of life for good or for bad. He sees them as people whom he is trying to reach with his love and grace ... and he may just be trying to reach them, connect with them, save them, through you.

Loving your neighbors, and being a good ambassador for Christ in your neighborhood, is definitely not always easy, is it? But God's Word reminds us and exhorts us to love our neighbors over and over again, in the Old Testament, in the New Testament; and, today, in the words of Jesus himself.

But now for the hard part. Jesus says, in his Sermon on the Mount, "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." Love your enemies?

A pastor was giving a sermon based on Jesus' command here to love our enemies. "Many of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives," he says the congregation. "So raise your hands if you have many enemies." And quite a few people raise their hands. "Now raise your hands if you have only a few enemies." And about half as many people raise their hands. "Now raise your hands if you have only one or two enemies." And even fewer people raised their hands. "See," says the priest, "most of us feel like we have enemies."

"Now raise your hands if you have no enemies at all." And the pastor looks around, and looks around, and finally, way in the back, a very, very old man named John raises his hand. He stands up and says, "I have no enemies whatsoever!" Delighted, the pastor invites John to the front of

the church. "What a blessing!" the pastor says. "How old are you, John?" "I'm 98 years old, and I have no enemies." The pastor says, "What a wonderful Christian life you lead! And tell us all how it is that you have no enemies." "All of those rotten, no-good, stinking, blankety-blanks have died!"

Most of us, sadly, go through life with -- for better or worse, and no matter how hard we try -- at least a few people we may feel are our "enemies" ... people who seem to hate us, people whom we've offended, people who refuse to accept our apologies, people at work who we've angered, members of our families who hold a grudge against us, people we can't stand and can't forgive. It's a sad part of human life.

And it's a hard part of life. Then we come to church, we hear Jesus telling us to love our enemies, and it seems to make things even harder. It seems to be impossible! How are we supposed to love our enemies sincerely? How are we supposed to pray for people who hate us and want us to fail? It seems almost masochistic -- a surefire recipe for psychological disaster.

But it's not. This is Jesus talking. This is our loving Lord, who knows what's best for us, and knows what he can accomplish through us. It's not that Jesus is just setting us up for failure here, or raising the bar impossibly high. Jesus was talking in this sermon, early in his public ministry years, about learning to live as he lived, learning to love others as he loved -- and then went he out and spent the rest of his ministry years showing his disciples time and again what he meant, modeling himself and living out himself these challenging principles.

Now, Jesus knows that we can't pull off this kind of living by our own will or strength. But he shows us the way, He forgives us our failures. He pours into our hearts his kind of love for neighbors and his kind of love even for enemies.

You see, it's not that we as Christ's followers are supposed to be able to love our neighbors and enemies. It's that Jesus can and will love our neighbors and our enemies through us.

I want you to pray about this. I want you to talk to the Lord about this. Don't just listen to the sermon and go home, then ignore your neighbors and put up bigger walls against your enemies this week. Ask God to help you find some way to love that particular person you're struggling to love. Ask Jesus what he means by that word, "love," and to show you how he wants you to live it out. Ask him to teach you to pray for that person who's persecuting you.

Remember, as you're wrestling with these words this week, the words Jesus prayed on Good Friday from his cross. "Father, forgive them," he prayed for his enemies, "For they know not what they do." We were all, you know, his enemies that day, because of our sin. My sins and your sins -- not the nails, not the soldiers, but our sins -- were what crucified Jesus. But he loved us anyway. He prayed for us, he forgave us, he died for us ... and his love can and will change us. Jesus calls you and me to this same new way of living. Jesus' love empowers you and me to his radical way of loving.

Now for the hard part! Amen.