

The 7th Sunday After the Epiphany – Fr. John Warfel

When was the last time you were in a fight,
a real, knockdown, drag out fight?
Was it with a brother or sister?
Was it at a playground?

To remember our last real physical fight,
Many of us must go way back in our past;
Other's don't have to go back quite so far.

It doesn't matter when it was or who you fought,
It doesn't matter whether the fight escalated to hair pulling and scratching-
or to round house punches, broken jaws and bloody noses.
Fist fights, punching, slapping, kicking, shaking -
they all express the same emotion: **rage**
seemingly uncontrollable *human rage*

Remember that kind of rage?
That hot, flushed, irrational, burning kind of rage,
where the harder you got hit, the harder you hit back?
Remember the rush of adrenaline?
Remember the overpowering urge to keep hitting-
as spectators egged you on?

Up against that kind of rage,
Turn the other cheek sounds pretty wimpy, doesn't it?
Jesus commands: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*
But when we are consumed by rage
Turn the other cheek comes across as weak, cowardly-
if not just a little pathetic.

Even when we're not consumed by rage
Our Lord's words are troubling and difficult
Do we become doormats when we obey them?
Do they excuse (or even condone) physical or sexual abuse?
Are we really **not** supposed to defend ourselves?

There's a big difference between harboring anger-
and stopping an abuser or a bully
Sometimes bullies must be stopped.
That's the whole argument behind the theory of a *just war*.

No, Jesus doesn't want us to enable abusers
He doesn't expect us never to get angry.
A fair amount of adrenaline pumped through his veins-
as Jesus cleared the Temple of the money changers

Sometimes anger is righteous,
and once the storm blows over we are left with a calm stillness

When Jesus says, *Love your enemies*
That's not a call suddenly to morph into Melanie Wilkes from *Gone with the Wind*
Christ does not expect that, even if it were possible
He knows that some people just rub us the wrong way
And for whatever reason, we'd just as soon not be in their company
This isn't an ideal situation, of course,
but it is a realistic one just the same.

When Jesus says, *Love your enemies*,
He asks us to do something far more difficult-
than just turning the other cheek.
He asks us to acknowledge the **humanity of our enemies**,
the human dignity of our enemies-
simply because they are fellow humans created by God.

This isn't as easy as it sounds
We'd much rather hatefully dismiss our enemies,
refusing to believe that they too are children of God;
that they also hurt, bleed and suffer.

When we strip our enemies of their humanity,
When we strip whole groups of people of their humanity,
In our minds and hearts, they no longer exist
They are beneath our notice, worthless, **subhuman**

Jesus says, *Don't do that! Don't think that way!*
The first step in loving our enemy-
is to recognize the humanity of our enemy.
For we can't continue to hate someone forever-
once we discover that she or he is a real, live person,
A person with feelings, hopes, dreams and **Incarnational Possibilities** just like us

The second step in loving our enemy-
is to discover that the opposite of love is not hate, it is **fear**
If you hate someone, dare to ask yourself:
What is it about him or her that you fear?
It's certainly easier to mindlessly hate another
than it is to be vulnerable to our own internalized fear

Or as a wise confessor once told me
Chose your enemies carefully:
Because if you hate them,
you are likely to become just like them.

Loving our enemies has nothing to do with getting along
Loving our enemies is not God telling us: *play nice now*
When Christ tells us to love our enemies,
he's not concerned with good social order;
he's concerned with the health of our souls.
Hating rots the soul, it chokes the Spirit-
and clogs the Flow of God's love

Living the golden rule is the surest way to unclog the divine Flow
Doing unto others isn't just for the benefit of those others;
it's for the health of our own souls as well

When we are merciful, we assimilate God's mercy
When we don't judge, we are not judged
When we don't condemn, we are not condemned,
When we forgive, God forgives.

Love your enemies.
It's a tall order for a society obsessed with short cuts
And there are no shortcuts to spiritual wholeness
It's hard work to recognize the humanity of our enemies
It's unnerving to discover that the opposite of love isn't hate, it's fear.
Oh, how we hate to confront our fears, don't we?
And yet, and yet, that is precisely what Jesus asks us to do, or try to do

But don't lose heart:
Nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ,
not even our fist fights,
not even our failed attempts at living the golden rule,
not even our cold indifference,
which is just a more sophisticated, civilized form of a slap across the face

The **love** in *love your enemies* comes from God
It is not an act of self-will
We can't force ourselves to love
We can only channel God's love a love that flows freely within

Love,
the *experience* of love,
the *ability* to love **is a gift**,
a spiritual gift from God

God created love.
God manifests love.
God **is** love.
Despite all the times we avoid it, reject it, or deny it,
Ultimately, love will be the final victor,
Not fear, not hate.
And that is great news!

