

Frenemy

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Saint Paul's, Batesville  
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 25, Year A  
October 23, 2011  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of  
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The great English writer G.K. Chesterton once said of today's Gospel, "Jesus here tells us to love our neighbors. Elsewhere the bible tells us we should love our enemies. This is because, generally speaking, they are the same people." If you know Chesterton, you'll know that this statement does not belie his public character; I don't think there's a whiff of sarcasm or misanthropy in it. Chesterton had plenty of "friendly enemies"—or to use the contemporary portmanteau: *frenemies*—chief among them George Bernard Shaw, people whom he loved greatly and with whom he disagreed viscerally.

I think our current political class could learn something from Chesterton.

Indeed, we all can and must, because it is none other than a mandate from Jesus himself:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

We may respond to this by asking "well, then, who is my neighbor?" In St. Luke's version of the story, the lawyer who asks the initial question and receives Jesus' famous response, proceeds to ask the second question—*Who is my neighbor?*—in order to trick Jesus, and Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

You likely remember how that one goes. The priest and the Levite—righteous men by Jewish religious standards—pass by the wounded traveler without offering any kind of assistance. The Samaritan, a member of a race and religion very

much at odds with the Jews, rescues the traveler and pays his expenses during his convalescence. Who was the traveler's neighbor? None other than a man whom circumstance had made his enemy.

We have a rather narrow definition of love, which I don't think is unique to our time and place, but which is nonetheless misguided. We hear the word "love" and what do we think? We probably think of warm feelings for somebody because of some kinship or friendship or personal attraction. Warm feelings for somebody are well and good, but Christian charity is a much broader concept, and it seems to me to have little to do with those of whom we are predisposed to be fond.

Love in the Christian sense includes a commitment to act on behalf of those with whom we have little in common and even those with whom we are at enmity. Look back at that reading from Leviticus. Unfortunately it skipped several verses which are germane to our discussion of love. In the

verses we heard, the Israelites are commanded to avoid prejudice and partiality, to avoid slander, to shun hatred, and to divest themselves of resentment and grudges. In the twelve verses our lectionary skipped, the children of Israel are also commanded not to steal, not to put off paying an employee even one day, not to be cruel to those who cannot defend themselves, and even not to harvest all of one's land so that the poor might take the produce around the borders of one's farm. All of these commandments are summed up in that elegant but seemingly impossible commandment: love thy neighbor as thyself.

You've heard me say it before from this pulpit and here it is again, perhaps my most often repeated comment on the Christian life: love is about commitment and sacrifice. If one is committed to loving one's spouse, he must sacrifice his own selfish concerns for the good of the relationship. If one is committed to loving one's children, he

must sacrifice getting what he wants and doing what he wants to a great extent in order to be present and to support the child. If one is committed to loving the poor, he's got to do something about it at his own expense. If one is committed to loving the Christ's Church and those who do not yet believe, he must give sacrificially of his time, talent, and treasure to support the Church's mission of reconciling all people everywhere to God and each other.

And the really hard part is that we cannot show partiality. We cannot choose to love only those whom we like. We must commit to sacrificing ourselves for those whom we don't particularly like:

Love your enemies [Jesus says] and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You,

therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This seems an impossible task, but in truth we already have the greatest example: Jesus Christ who laid down his life not only for the people with whom he had mutual fondness, but for those who hated him, those who spat at him, those who scourged him and nailed him to the Cross. We are commanded to take up our own cross, to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others as Christ had done. Will we do it?

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.