

“Love Is Tough”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 5:38-48
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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In a year like this one, when *resist* is a word I hear repeatedly, when there are movements popping up everywhere inviting me to join the resistance, I am curious to know what Jesus really meant when he said, “Do not *resist* an evildoer.”

Does Jesus really mean do not fight for your rights, do not defend yourself from attack, do not say “no” to anyone who asks for more of your time, your resources, your energy? Is Jesus suggesting we remain neutral in war and silent in the face of evil?

My colleague, Allyson Robinson, said she wanted to title her sermon, “Ten Reasons I’m Pretty Sure Jesus Would Punch a Nazi (and You Should Too).” We all know Jesus didn’t shy away from being feisty or calling out an injustice. The same Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount also turned over the tables in the temple. The same Jesus who said, “Blessed are you who are poor,” also said, “Woe to you who are rich.” The Jesus who ate with sinners also said to the Pharisees, “You blind fools! You snakes! You brood of vipers!”

I recently discovered a painting of “Angry Jesus” with his brows furrowed, his eyes red, his mouth open in what looks like a roar. He is in the temple, whip in hand, knocking over tables, his hair on end like flames shooting from his head. It wasn’t an image of Jesus I am accustomed to seeing. And yet angry Jesus is the same Jesus who dies on the cross, who says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” This Jesus also says, “Love your enemy. Turn the other cheek. Do not resist. Give to everyone who begs.” How do we make sense of these two seemingly contradictory Jesuses? If as Christians we strive to be Christ-like, which Christ should we like?

Is it possible that the same radical, magnanimous love of God is present and alive in Jesus at all times? Christ is God incarnate when Jesus’ love looks like unfettered gifts of mercy; Christ is God incarnate when Jesus’ love looks like anger. Christ is God incarnate when Jesus is gentle; Christ is God incarnate when Jesus’ words are pointed. Just how are we to make sense of Jesus, and how are we to make sense of love?

Let’s think about Jesus’ instruction, “Give to everyone who begs.” If your child begs, do you give them whatever they beg for? Even if it is harmful to their wellbeing? Of course not. What if it’s your boyfriend or girlfriend, and they beg you to stay even though it hasn’t been working out? What about a beggar on the street who asks for five dollars? Fifty dollars? One hundred? What if it’s your friend, and she begs you to drop what you’re doing and come to the rescue . . . for the fifth time this week? What if it is your teenager and he or she begs for one more chance before you take away cell phone privileges?

Clearly Jesus' words in this passage are not a blanket solution to every dilemma—discernment and interpretation are required at nearly every turn. If you've ever tried just loving your family or loving your church, much less your actual enemies, then you know love isn't easy, and it sure isn't simple.

In fact, rarely do you encounter anyone who is all friend or all foe. In your day-to-day life, you do not often face off with Lord Voldemort or the Wicked Witch of the West. Instead, you face your uncle, who helped pay for your college but makes sexist jokes around the dinner table. You face your co-worker, who brought you casserole when you had surgery but helped sabotage your promotion. You face your spouse, whom you adore and who regularly drives you bonkers. You face your child, whom you love more than life itself, who sometimes lies to you and says mean things to you. You face your mother, who gave you birth and warmth and milk and tenderness as a baby, but cannot give you the emotional support you need in becoming your best and fullest self as an adult. Love is tricky, and so is identifying your enemy at any given moment. You probably know that often your enemy isn't even out there somewhere; often your enemy is you.

When Jesus says, "Love your enemies," I don't think he is suggesting we acquiesce to evil—whether that evil shows up in a foreign dictator or in your own home—but rather we keep clinging to the good. Maybe Jesus is saying there is more than one way to fight a fight. Maybe he is suggesting we lay down our swords and shields and take up poetry, friendship, and random acts of kindness—which is not to say we ought to be pansies. I think the message of Jesus is: "You are so much stronger than evil. You do not have to stoop to that level." Maybe Jesus is saying there is a more creative way to respond to violence than to answer it with more violence.

Love, if you ask me, is tough. I don't just mean that the act of loving is difficult. I also mean that love itself is made of something hardy, something durable. Love is resilient.

To turn the other cheek means the bully must look you right in the eye as you turn your head. The bully must deal with the fact that he or she cannot get a rise out of you, that he or she cannot make you cower, that he or she cannot *make you* do anything. You are your own person, not some slave to the impulses of rage and retaliation. When you turn the other cheek, the bully must deal with the fact that you have a face and eyes and personhood. To turn the other cheek is not the stance of a coward, but the stance of someone with remarkable inner power.

Jesus was nonviolent, but that doesn't mean he was docile and mild. Commentators have noted that if all you're wearing is your coat and cloak, and someone takes your coat, and then you give them your cloak, well, that leaves you in your birthday suit, which makes giving away your cloak a little less passive and demure than it originally sounded. As my friend Megan told me, it's a response with a bit of snark to it.

Loving your enemies doesn't necessarily mean you have them over for dinner or buy them a birthday presents or stay up with them late at night playing games and sharing secrets. You do not have to trust your enemy in order to love them, nor do you have to like them, agree with them, or give them permission to mistreat you. To love your enemy doesn't mean you make excuses for their bad behavior or avoid the truth about how they have wounded you.

Love is not the same thing as turning a blind eye to injustice. Tough love speaks up. Tough love sets and maintains boundaries. Tough love looks like Jesus. If your love isn't tough . . . it might not be love. It might be enabling. It might be cowardice. It might be infatuation. It might be addiction. It might be co-dependency.

So what does it mean to love one's enemy?

Love looks different on different days and in different situations, but most days to love your enemy means you don't hit back. It means retaliation and revenge never factor into your plans. It means you respond rather than react. They spit; you sing. They hit; you hug. They squash; you fly. They slander; you tell the truth. They build walls; you build bridges. They throw stones; you toss a little more compassion into the air. To love your enemy means you choose kindness when meanness would have felt more satisfying.

To love your enemy means you never lose sight of their humanity. You don't want punishment for them; you want redemption. To love your enemy means you pray for them rather than ridicule them. Instead of complaining, you take constructive and intentional action. You confront, but you do not hate.

To love your enemy means you love yourself. Love rejects self-hatred. If you're the one beating yourself up, berating yourself for your flaws and mistakes, you pause and look yourself in the eye and acknowledge your own humanity. Love is not wimpy, and love is not self-punishing. Love is neither fight nor flight. Love is engagement. Love does not internalize another person's violence and blame yourself instead.

There is a huge, gaping difference between mere resignation and nonviolent resistance. If you spend more time being upset with yourself than angry at the forces of evil, that's a sign you've strayed from the way of love. If you spend more time casting blame than working towards the good of all, you've likely strayed from the way of love. If you spend more time making excuses for bad behavior than deciding how to respond in a healthy way, that's a sign you've strayed from the way of love. If your inaction is avoidance or if your silence is helping maintain a culture of deceit, you have strayed from the way of love. Love is honest. Love is open. Love is vulnerable. Love is tough. Love takes grit and heart and courage. Love shows up.

As Faith Kopplin said in Bible Study last week, "Love is present."

Turning the other cheek is a far different thing than crumbling to the floor in despair. Going the extra mile is very different from giving up and giving in. Love is active participation in the messiness of life and relationship.

The fact of the matter is that the world may be waging war all around us, and we'll still find ways to be our own worst enemy. The fact of the matter is that we are going to hurt and disappoint one another. Sometimes our very own friends will feel like foes, and things will get all topsy-turvy. We will make mistakes, and we will have misunderstandings. We will forgive and we will ask for forgiveness. How will we ever learn to love our mortal enemies if we do not learn the complicated lessons of loving our neighbor, our friend, our partner—not only when

they are at their best, but also when they are at their worst? How will we forgive those who hurt and wound us if we cannot forgive ourselves? How will we ever love our enemies if we do not know what love really is, if our definition of love is unhealthy or insufficient, domineering or self-punishing?

I am so grateful for this body of believers, which we could easily call our school of love. Contrary to popular perception, there are no professors among us, only students and partners in learning. We gather together week after week—this building is our practice field. This Spirit of God that flows in us and around us is our guide. This cross is our symbol of radical forgiveness and love; this resurrection story is our hope.

When we enter the church, and then the world, may we not greet only our brothers and sisters—the people who think like us, sound like us, look like us. May we greet all God's children, including the child within us, with love and respect and holy curiosity. May our love be loud. May our love be honest. May our love be resilient, forgiving, and kind. May our love be sincere. May our love be teachable. May our love be strong and inexhaustible. May our love be lavish. May our love be gentle and nonviolent. May our love be tough—tough as nails, tough as Christ on a cross, tough as resurrection. Amen.