**What Does It Mean to Love Our Enemies?**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC, Feb. 24, 2019**

*Scripture:* [*Luke 6:27-38*](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=113#gospel_reading)*,* [*Genesis 45:3-11, 15*](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=113#hebrew_reading)

**{Dirk slide}** You likely know the story of Dirk Willems, the early Anabaptist martyr, and have seen this engraving of the moment for which we remember him, which is taken from the *Martyrs Mirror* – the large collection of early Anabaptist martyr stories that many Mennonites had or still have in their homes. The story goes that Dirk was a 16th-century Dutch Anabaptist who was imprisoned and sentenced to death for his beliefs, like so many others at the time. But, in the middle of winter, he manages to escape, and runs across a frozen pond. Because he is so light from lack of proper nourishment, he’s able to run across the thin ice. The well-fed guard who is chasing him is not so lucky, however, and falls through the ice. Amazingly, Dirk turns back to help his pursuer out of the icy waters. He ends up being returned to prison and is burned at the stake in 1569.

The Mennonite church is known as one of the historic peace churches, one of the churches for whom Jesus’ call to love even our enemies is taken seriously and has been taken seriously for 500 years. Because of this, Dirk’s story of literally saving the life of his enemy has become a formative story for many Mennonites,[[1]](#footnote-1) so much so that a few months ago, a sculpture of Dirk saving his prison guard was unveiled at the Mennonite Heritage Village **{Slide 2/3}.** If you’ve never been, it’s kind of like an outdoor, Mennonite version of the Western Development Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Our Scripture passages for today were likely what inspired Dirk Willems to live the way he did. Our passage from Luke picks up where Nora left off in her sermon last week, about the blessings and curses in Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain” – the Gospel of Luke’s parallel to the Gospel of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. And when we hear it, we can see why this has been called one of the “hard sayings” of Jesus! We hear, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” And in verse 31: “Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” (Luke 6:27b-28, 31-32). Many Christians throughout history have tried to explain away these passages, to say that Jesus didn’t really mean for us to follow this teaching in real life. In his theology of “Just War,” Augustine of Hippo even makes a convoluted argument that killing your enemy in battle can be a form of loving them. (I’m not quite sure how people bought into the logic of that one, but there you go.) But for our Anabaptist-Mennonite history, we have tried to take these teachings of Jesus’ seriously, as difficult as they may be. But that doesn’t mean we don’t wrestle with what these words mean to us, in our context, in our lives. And there has certainly been a shift in how we understand the love of enemies from Dirk’s time – from the beginnings of Anabaptism in the 1500s – to today.

Based on Matthew’s version of this teaching in the Sermon on the Mount – which includes the words, “Do not resist an evildoer” (Matt. 5:39), the traditional Mennonite peace position has been nonresistance to violence, in the image of the martyrs who supposedly went willingly to their deaths. But at least since the mid-20th century, many Mennonites have been questioning this understanding of pacifism which is essentially passive, and which doesn’t take into account the ways that our context is drastically different from that of the early Anabaptists, who faced ruthless persecution and martyrdom as very real possibilities. Many of us have shifted from understanding peace as nonresistance to violence, to a more active view of peace-making as nonviolent resistance to evil and violence. This is an important distinction! Instead of taking Matthew’s “Do not resist an evildoer” as a call to passive submission to wrongdoing, it is taken to mean, “Do not violently resist an evildoer” – as in, do not retaliate violently for violence done against you; do not sink to the level of the evildoer; take the high road. We cannot control the actions of others, but we can refrain from acting violently ourselves. And we can find examples from Jesus’ own life and ministry in which he clearly and publically resists and calls wrongdoers to account (mostly the corrupt religious leaders of his day). His overturning of the money changers’ tables in the Temple is the best-known example of Jesus taking nonviolent action to resist an oppressive system of his day. Incidentally, it’s also found in all four Gospels (Matt. 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, John 2), so we know it must be important.

The story of Joseph and his brothers from Genesis 45 provides another interpretation of what it looks like to love one’s enemies. In Joseph’s case, his enemies are found among his own family members – his brothers, who many years ago, sold him into slavery. Against their intentions, he has become a leader in Egypt rather than remaining a slave, and the dreams that they resented him for have become a gift that he uses to prevent many people from suffering hunger due to the seven-year famine that has come upon the land. Remarkably, he also makes sure to provide food to his brothers and their families, so that they will not starve. He does so secretly at first, and then, in this part of the story, reveals his identity to them, saying: “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. . . . Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen. . . . I will provide for you there – since there are five more years of famine to come – so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’” (Gen. 45:4b, 9-10a, 11). Here, much like in the story of Dirk Willems, we have Joseph coming face to face with those who have wronged him, and refusing to exact revenge on them, despite his power to do so. Instead, he takes the high road, returning good for evil.

But I want us to pay careful attention here to the conditions which allow Joseph to offer life-giving food to those who tried to do away with him: namely, much time has passed, he is in a position of safety and belonging, he has meaningful work, and he only forgives them when he’s ready and with much emotion and weeping. Joseph has presumably done some healing before confronting his brothers again. I ask us to be careful here because the story of Joseph and his brothers and the story of Dirk Willems have been used in some harmful ways by the Mennonite church. These stories have been used to pressure victims of violence to forgive prematurely, or to minimize their suffering in ways that enable offenders to continue their harmful behaviour without being held sufficiently accountable. Mennonite peacebuilder Lisa Schirch speaks about it this way: “the celebration of martyrdom and love of enemies can silently ignore victims who have no choice in their suffering. In the case of sexual violence, churches often extend an embrace to the offenders while doing little to support victims. . . . While Mennonites have had a significant voice in advocating for the end of war, Mennonite women have waged an internal nonviolent struggle to end sexual violence within the church and to recognize the violence of processes that silence victims. . . . Our peace theology has not caught up with the dilemma of how to keep victims in the center of our peacebuilding…” **{Next Slide}** Along these lines, she re-imagines the image of Dirk Willems, adding messages in support of victims – “end rape culture,” “support the victims,” “survivors deserve better” and “don’t be silent, speak up.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

So in our context today, what does it mean to love our enemies? We have seen that it doesn’t mean passivity – letting someone walk all over us is not love. That much is clear. Lisa Schirch points us to what she calls a “Two-handed approach” to peacebuilding **{Next Slide}.** As a church, we are called to “both reach out one hand to love those with whom we disagree, and put one hand up to resist injustice and to push and advocate for justice and peace.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, with one hand, we say “stop” or “no” to those who are being violent, and with the other, we say, “we will not dehumanize you or exact revenge on you or be violent toward you. You are still a child of God.” What a powerful way to think about our love of enemies as nonviolent resistance to evil and violence.

I want to leave you with one of the most moving and creative examples of nonviolent resistance that I have ever heard of **{Next slide}.** It took place in the Netherlands – so we’re back in Dirk Willems’ homeland, but in the present day. Just a few weeks ago, Protestant Bethel Church in The Hague ended a 97-day-long church service it had been conducting. That’s 97 days, 24 hours a day of continuous church services. Now why were they overcome by this sudden fervor for never-ending worship? Well, an Arminian refugee family, the Tamrazyan family, was facing deportation to a dangerous situation, and sought asylum in that church. According to an obscure law, police aren’t allowed to interrupt worship services to make an arrest, so the church kept the service going continuously for over three months! The pastor of that church and about 650 other pastors took turns leading the services. Finally, at the end of January, the family was granted permission to remain in the Netherlands.[[5]](#footnote-5) So here we have worship itself as an act on nonviolent resistance and support for the vulnerable. What a creative way of resisting an unjust situation, and what a wonderful example of overcoming evil with good. AMEN

1. Lisa Schirch, “Eight Ways to Strengthen Mennonite Peacebuilding,” *Conrad Grebel Review* (Fall, 2017): 371. See <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/fall-2017/eight-ways-strengthen-mennonite-peacebuilding> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://steinbachonline.com/local/dirk-willems-statue-unveiled-at-mhv [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Schirch, 372-373. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Schirch, 364-365. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dutch-church-marathon-97-day-mass-armenian-refugee-family-tamrazyan-netherlands/?fbclid=IwAR0T4HW1P1i7OzIO8FqDxpLZEreT4ROT-dJ4VMUCQavGtsVnSgEdIWyus8k> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)