

People love to have a good enemy—and by good, I mean the kind that works—that makes your blood boil, gets under your skin and into your head, and keeps you from turning off the TV or putting down your book. The kind that sucks you into real-life dramas, too, whether it's a war, a high-profile trial, the self-destruction of a young star, or even a neighbor's divorce.

Are there any Survivor fans here? Remember Colton? He was infuriating! He drove me crazy, but he kept me engaged. Vince, the kids, and I bonded over our dislike of him, as did the other players.

And I suspect that many of us know all too well how relationships can form around a common enemy, Especially those of you who are still the ever-shifting landscape of middle-school friendships—when painfully often, your friend today is sealing her friendship with someone else tomorrow, at your expense.

And what about war? You can't have a war without an enemy. And so government and media join forces to paint a one-dimensional caricature of the enemy and their perspective. No time for nuance when action is called for.

Having an enemy, it seems, feeds our sense of righteousness, or holiness. When I hear commands to be holy or perfect, as we do in our readings today, I get anxious. I start thinking about all the ways that I'm not properly pious, or perfect, and I start resenting them, and wanting to root them out. And when I'm feeling this way—incomplete, unholy and flawed—, enemies become easy screens for my discomfort.

An example from this week: I was walking my dog, Ginger, off leash on a gravel road near my house. We came up behind a woman talking on her phone and strolling a toddler, who was munching on something. Ginger slowed down next to them. Ginger has been on a diet. Before I realized what she was doing, she stuck her nose into the baby's seat and took a bite of his food. Mortified, I apologized, scolded my dog, and put her leash on.

But the mom was upset—understandably. She snapped at me to try *using* my leash, and I heard her complaining into the phone about us, as we walked on.

I was completely in the wrong—and embarrassed. But I found myself blaming her anyway, and distinguishing myself from her: “Oh, she's one of *those* moms—over-protective!” “She never even stopped talking on her phone.” “She

clearly doesn't know the ropes around here!" I started plotting how to avoid her in the future.

And then I realized what I was doing: I was turning her into an enemy, in order to mask *my* fault, and shame.

Peace-builder John Lederach explains that we do, in fact, create our enemies.

"Enemies," he says, "are rooted and constructed in our hearts and minds, and take on social significance as others share in the construction."<sup>1</sup> He identifies at least three moves in the construction of an enemy: separating ourselves, seeing ourselves as superior, and dehumanizing the other. In the run-in with my neighbor, I think I hit all three.

This enemy-making process applies to groups as well as individuals. One of the most extreme examples is the creation of Jews-as-enemy in Nazi Germany. In the midst of the depression and national humiliation that followed World War I, Nazis tapped into a long-standing prejudice against Jews, while exalting Aryan Germans as a superior race.

To protect the "purity" of the German nation, Jews were rounded up and crammed into ghettos. With them segregated, in squalid conditions, it was easier to pretend that they were inherently inferior--to deny in them the qualities that made them human.

And you know the rest—dehumanizing thoughts led to dehumanizing actions and to the holocaust of more than 6 million Jews.

Closer to home, we've seen the enemy-making process at work in every war we've waged, including the amorphous wars on drugs, on terror, and on crime. In each case, society's anxiety is fixed onto a common, public enemy, some kind of "other," who is singled out as *the* threat; deemed intellectually or morally inferior; separated from others; and demonized and dehumanized.

Of course, it's trickier when it comes to legitimate wrongdoing, not just scapegoating, as we saw in the Holocaust. But the enemy-making steps are the same.

In our criminal-justice system, for example, once blame has been fixed, and the "enemy" identified, we cement that identity by sending convicted criminals

into exile, where they will be defined by their crimes, treated like the corrupted people they are assumed to be, and deprived of some basic human rights.

Even after rehabilitation and release, they'll bear the **stigma** of felon—a stigma that legitimizes discrimination. A stigma that makes it hard to find a job or a place to live, to receive many federal benefits, even to vote in many states. A stigma that says that, no matter how much you've grown or changed, you'll continue to be defined by that bad decision.

Indeed, isn't this what we do to all our enemies, public and personal? We freeze the frame at the moment of their offense. And refuse to move on—or to let them move on.

This seems to serve society well, because it seems to simplify justice. It allows the rest of us to imagine that guilt and danger are safely contained. To imagine ourselves as pure and innocent, absolved of responsibility for the social ills that often contribute to crime, like poverty, and racism.

But Jesus says, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you."

Now, I don't think he's talking about loving enemies in the way I've been talking about it. I don't think he's talking about loving the grudge, or being attached to having an enemy because of how good it can feel to be holier-than-thou.

Jesus seems to mean really loving them—actively loving them, as people, and looking for God in them. Jesus seems to mean remembering that God our Father is their father too--seeing ourselves in them and them in us—seeing the potential for good in them, and the potential for evil in ourselves.

Jesus refused to construct enemies. He does **not** separate himself from those who oppose or frighten him or threaten his purity. **He turns toward them, in hope.** And in faith—faith in the God who shines sun and rains rain on all of us, and whose will for all of us is reconciliation.

Jesus invites us to turn toward our enemies, too—not in aggression, and not in submission. But rather in a way that challenges both of these responses—in a way that reminds us of our shared humanity.

If you back-slap me, and I turn the other cheek toward you, I'm demanding that you see me as a human being—and see yourself as a human being, too. Likewise, if a Roman soldier in Roman territory commands me, a sub-citizen, to carry his load for a mile, I take power back by carrying it an extra mile.

Does it cost me to turn toward my enemies? Yes. Does it make me vulnerable? Of course. Will I be disappointed or betrayed or look foolish? Probably. Will it expose me—and me flaws and sins? Yes.

As theologian Walter Wink says, “To engage evil is a spiritual act, because it requires the rare courage to face our own most ancient and intractable evils within. It means abandoning one of the greatest and oldest lies: that the world is made up of good people and bad people.”<sup>ii</sup>

Turning toward our enemies *is* a spiritual act: we look for God in them, and we find God at work in them. Or, maybe what we find is God at work in us *through* them.

So, we *do* need our enemies, after all. Not to justify ourselves, or to make ourselves feel more righteous, or to strengthen other relationships.

We need them because our holiness depends on them. Our wholeness depends on reconciling with them and with the dark parts of ourselves, or our community, that they may represent.

Faith in God requires us to have faith in every human being, including ourselves, because no one and no thing is beyond God's mercy and redemption.

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<sup>i</sup> Lederach, John, *Journey toward Reconciliation*.

<sup>ii</sup> Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, 79.