

“Expecting Enemies”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

John said to [Jesus], ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.’

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The preacher, in his Sunday sermon, preached on forgiving one’s enemies. After a long sermon, he asked how many were willing to forgive their enemies. About half held up their hands. Not satisfied, he harangued for another twenty minutes and repeated his question. This time he received a response of about 80 percent. Still unsatisfied, he lectured for another 15 minutes and repeated his question. With all thoughts now on Sunday dinner, all responded except one elderly lady in the rear. “Mrs. Jones, are you not willing to forgive your enemies?” asked the preacher. “I don’t have any,” said the woman. “Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?” “Ninety-seven.” “That is incredible! Mrs. Jones, please come down in front and tell the congregation how a person can live to be 97, and not have an enemy in the world.” The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, very slowly turned around and said: “It’s easy, I just outlived the fools.”¹

In this morning’s text from Mark’s gospel, the disciples certainly believed they had enemies, one in particular – a roving healer who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but was not one of the twelve. It must have been particularly galling to see this wayfaring wonder-worker succeed where, just a few verses back in the same chapter, the disciples themselves had been unable to cast out a demon. They wanted not competitors. They were Jesus’ disciples. They were the greatest – remember last week’s text? Whoever this person was, they were no follower of Jesus and they had no right using his name to cast out demons or anything else! Right, Jesus? Wrong!

Though the disciples seem to be saying that whoever is not for them is against them, Jesus flips that on its head. “Do not stop him,” he says, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Ouch! That must’ve stung. I can’t help but wonder, though, how many of us, knowingly or not, do the very same thing. If someone doesn’t look like us, or speak like us, or use the same political, religious, or national labels we use for ourselves, they couldn’t possibly be for us or collaborate with us to be a force for good in the world, right? “Do we move through the world assuming that people

¹ “The Secret to Having No Enemies,” Ba-bamail.com: <https://www.ba-bamail.com/jokes/senior-jokes/?jokeid=1096>.

are against us until they [somehow] prove otherwise?”² Sadly, I think that’s exactly how many people move through the world and life of the twenty-first century. We expect enemies everywhere.

Sociologist Dr. Randy Lynn, says this is because:

No matter what you believe, we’re told that if we keep fighting the good fight, keep standing up for our beliefs, keep pouring our blood, sweat, and tears into the right causes...eventually we’ll win. But when we spend years working hard, with not much to show for it...it’s pretty depressing.

We’ve already identified certain groups as “the enemy.” No matter how hard we try to outdo them...we can’t defeat them. No matter how hard we strike...they strike back. No matter how many people we recruit to our side...they sucker just as many over to their side. We start to regard them as a mix of lying, cheating, evil geniuses...and blundering, incompetent idiots. That’s the only way we can rationalize to ourselves how so many people can work so hard for a good cause...yet we still find ourselves locked in combat with those transparently bad guys. But eventually, we don’t just see those folks as our enemy.

Next, we turn on the uncommitted, the wishy-washy — the ones who haven’t chosen a side in this great battle between good and evil, or aren’t doing everything they can to support us good guys. If *they* woke up, and realized what was at stake...if *they* saw how clearly right we are...if *they* cared or worked even half as hard as we do...we wouldn’t be stuck in this stalemate. By sitting out, they’re letting the bad guys win.

So now we have *two* enemies: the original bad guys, and the people who aren’t as involved in this struggle as they “should” be. But it doesn’t stop there. Because any cause has internal strife: disagreements over minor tenets, or over how best to win the war. Increasingly we wonder...what if we’re being held back? What if the reason we haven’t won yet is because we’re being sabotaged — intentionally or unintentionally — by these people who *claim* to be on our side, but who in fact support beliefs or tactics that basically amount to surrendering to the bad guys? Now we even see enemies among our own ranks!³

Dr. Lynn goes on to say that, “eventually, [we’re] only left with [ourselves]and small band of people who see things exactly as [we] do...and you see everybody else as either an enemy or an

² Nanette Sawyer. “What we cut off,” Christiancentury.org, September 24, 2021:
<https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/what-we-cut-mark-938-50>.

³ Randy Lynn, PhD. “Stop Seeing Enemies Everywhere,” Medium.com, June 8, 2017:
<https://medium.com/@fyresolution/5-8-stop-seeing-enemies-everywhere-3c37310ca2f1>.

enabler.”⁴ And let’s face it, it’s very hard to make change in our world if literally everyone who isn’t “us” is an enemy.

Psychologists have a label for people who go through life expecting enemies everywhere: Paranoid Personality Disorder. According to Mayo Clinic, characteristics of Paranoid Personality Disorder include lack of trust and suspicion of others and their motives; belief that others are trying to do harm with no reason to feel this way; doubts of loyalty, unwillingness to trust; hesitation to confide in others for fear that information will be used against them; interpreting innocent remarks or situations as personal insults or attacks; anger and hostility to what are believed to be slights or insults; and holding grudges.⁵ Sounds a little like the disciples doesn’t it? Sounds a little like some of the folks we hear about in history books or on the news, doesn’t it? Sounds a little like us sometimes, doesn’t it?

But what if, instead of expecting enemies everywhere, we looked for unexpected allies? What if we learned to work alongside whomever we can to uplift, heal, and celebrate our neighbors and our communities? What if we acknowledged that compassion, done by anyone, is still compassion? What if we recognized that if we’re not against each other, we’re actually *for* each other?⁶ I think many of the rifts in our communities could heal. I think politics in America could be different. I think the world could change for the better. And after all, isn’t that really what almost all of us want – a better world?

May we, and all people, stop seeing enemies everywhere. Instead, may we see neighbors, collaborators, change-agents, and friends. As Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Amen.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Personality Disorders: Paranoid Personality Disorder,” MayoClinic.org:
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/personality-disorders/symptoms-causes/syc-20354463>.

⁶ John van de Laar. “Proper 21B,” Sacredise.org, September 29, 2024: <https://sacredise.com/proper-21b/>.