

## FROM FEAR TO LOVE Spiritual Grounding in Anxious Times

“Forgiving Enemies, Restoring Communion”  
August 6, 2022 | Meditation Part Four *with Marjorie Thompson*

### “How Do I Love Thee? A Letter to my Enemies”

I do have enemies, and I know who you are. You are the ones who hurt the people I love. You subject my children to propaganda and soul-sucking media manipulation. You try to make my husband and sons believe that masculinity is measured by willingness to kill and to make money. You drive my daughters toward self-destructive behaviors in the name of desirability. You poison the air, the soil, the water, the spirit, shorten their lives and damage their health for profit.

You are the ones who set me at war with myself. You target my weaknesses and sins—my greed, my pride, my gluttony, my fear—and tempt me to measure my own worth by the satisfaction of my basest desires. So I eat too much, I work for public recognition, I buy what I do not need, I take my part in the racism and paranoia of our time.

You lure and you lie and you threaten. You live in Washington and in the Middle East and Hollywood and in middle America and in my household and in my heart. And as the Psalmist says, you seek to take my life; you oppress me, surround me, and exult over me.

So when Jesus says “Love your enemies,” does he mean you? And how shall I love you when you do evil? And why should I?

I believe that I must love you because we have been given to one another for that purpose. In some dark and mysterious way, we are gifts to one another. We have been given the historical moment, the circumstances, and the call to encounter in each other the very powers of darkness and light that afflict and heal this fallen world. And our assignment—yours and mine—lies in that encounter. We are here to learn how to love, how to exercise the power of love, even unto death, even toward those who violate what we hold dear.

I believe I must love you because my life depends upon it. Not only the life of my body, but the life of my soul. Indeed, we seem to have no guarantee that the body won't be destroyed in the process of learning to love. But until I learn to love you, I am likely to remain in the squalor of my own self-righteous judgments, protecting my own point of view, condemning and cutting off some who may be the very strangers sent to give me a chance to offer the cup of cold water.

I believe that I must love you because I am like you. Every year I live teaches me the truth that nothing human is alien to me. So when I look at your hypocrisy, your brutality, your self-serving propaganda, your abuse of power, your betrayal of innocence, I must open my mind and heart to that in me which is reflected in the mirror you provide. Perhaps it is latent rather than manifest. Perhaps its effects appear to be more innocuous.

Comparing my evil with yours to reassure myself that I am among the righteous “misses the mark” completely. Counterintuitive though it may be, your sin and my sin, your darkness and my darkness, merit the same condemnation and have been covered by the same amazing grace.

So I believe that I must love you because you have been loved—lavishly, incomprehensibly—by the One who loved me, and who has put us into each other’s hands to care for one another. Which make me consider, how do I love you?

I love you by embracing as fully as my imagination will allow the metaphor—and the fact—that we are brothers and sisters, imagined and willed into being by the same loving Creator. Your welfare is also mine, your shame is also mine, your struggle is also mine.

I love you by identifying the evils in which we find ourselves mired—the injustices, the brutalities, the deceptions, the greed—and holding them in the light. I love you by telling the truth as carefully and caringly as I can.

I love you by learning how to inhabit gray areas, by forfeiting the satisfactions of easy judgment and finding ways to sit down with you and find out what it is like to be you. I love you by studying your credo or your Koran or your party platform, your economic theories, your ideas of duty. And I love you by praying for the words and the wisdom to enter into the conversation that might redirect our energies into a path of mutual understanding.

I love you by praying for you, especially and precisely because you are those I experience as “persecutors.” Jesus says to do this so that we may be children of our Father in heaven. What a rich and curious idea—that it is in learning to love you, my enemies, that I grow into my role and inheritance as a child of God; that in loving you I will deepen my relationship with the source of all Love.

So how do I love you now? Badly. Intermittently. Sometimes grudgingly. But I know that we, you and I, are here to help one another work out our salvation, perhaps with fear and trembling. And so I must be grateful for you—not for the evil that you do, which is not mine to judge—but for the ways in which you, my enemies, are an occasion of grace.

*Abridged from an article by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre in Weavings, Mar-Apr 2006*

## Imagining God's Letter to You A Path Toward Self-Forgiveness

Most of us struggle to forgive ourselves for what we perceive or know to be our faults and weaknesses. When we cannot let go of self-condemnation, we effectively block ourselves from receiving the forgiveness God extends to us. We are saying, "God may forgive me, but I can't forgive myself." As long as we choose a prison of our own making, God cannot free us.

Here is a simple practice that can put us in touch with our "Inner Teacher"-- one way our Quaker friends refer to the Indwelling Spirit or Indwelling Christ.

- Identify a fault/weakness you feel you cannot forgive yourself for. Write it down as clearly as you can. Let yourself express your strongest feelings about this part of you, however harsh or despairing the language.
- Place your written statement in front of you and offer it to God. Pray for divine wisdom to perceive how God sees you through the eyes of love. Remember that God IS love, so divine judgment can only serve the purpose of healing and redemption. The poet William Blake says of human life: "We are put here a little space to learn to bear the beams of love."
- Imagine God regarding you with infinite tenderness, understanding you better than you understand yourself. God knows the deep roots of your weakness, and holds your pain with immense mercy. Feel this gentleness.
- Listen deeply to what God wants to communicate, and begin to write a letter from God to you:

Dear (Your Name),

When you have finished, read God's letter through slowly. Absorb the message. Place it alongside your written statement. Notice how God's words counteract self-condemnation. How do they change the way you see yourself? Write any new words you would choose to use about yourself now, and let them sink in.

Take a few moments to offer gratitude for any sense of healing or freedom that may have arisen in this time.

*[I developed this practice from an idea offered by my friend Dick Junkin, a retired pastor.]*

## **Guidelines for Writing a Good Apology**

1. Be respectful of the person you are writing to. Courtesy and tact are important.
2. Do not try to defend yourself, make excuses, or explain all the circumstances from your perspective.
3. Go right to the point and use simple, direct language.

Following these basic principles will result in a "clean, straightforward apology."  
It is a genuine spiritual discipline to exercise these guidelines consistently.

## **Writing a Letter of Forgiveness**

- Write a letter forgiving someone toward whom you feel resentment or deep disappointment. It could be someone you live or work with; a person who has already died; or even yourself. Who needs your forgiveness?
- Clarify the nature of the offensive behavior, and name the truth of your feelings -hurt, angry, shamed, grieved, betrayed. It may be helpful to put it in these terms: "When you did (or said) ..., I felt ...."
- State in your own words that you are choosing to let go of your resentment or desire to "pay back in kind" (if forgiving yourself, this means relinquishing the "satisfaction" of punishing yourself). You are expressing a desire to release the offender from the alienating effect of the offense on your relationship.

## **General Pointers**

Be aware that you cannot control another person's response, only your own. You are choosing to free yourself from the burden of this bondage to the past.

Remember, God has empowered you to forgive as you have been forgiven in Christ. Ask for grace to let God take the burden from you, now and forever.

You may decide to send this letter, or not. Regardless, you can expect some movement forward and a new sense of energy to flow from this exercise.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Revised from Companions in Christ, *The Way of Forgiveness*, 80, for *The Gift of Encouragement*, 66-67.