

“Confronted by Enemies”

Psalm 18:1-6, 16-19

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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In Ken Burns’ documentary on the Civil War, a remarkable scene is described in the last episode, a scene that took place on the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg.

This was in 1913, and the veterans from those two armies who were still alive decided to stage a reenactment of Pickett’s charge. All the old Union veterans up lined up on the ridge among the rocks, and all the old Confederate veterans started marching toward them across the field below.

Then an extraordinary event took place.

As the Union veterans began to rush down toward the Confederate veterans across the field, a great cry went up, and instead of reenacting the battle that they engaged in a half century earlier, this time they threw their arms around each other. They embraced one another.

Fifty years earlier, they were enemies!

In 1913, they talked and reminisced and laughed together like long-lost friends.

In a recent interview about his career in documentary film-making, Burns says:

“I’ve made films for more than 40 years about the U.S., but I’ve also made films about ‘us.’ All of the intimacy of that two-letter lowercase...pronoun [us] and all the majesty and contradiction of [the United States] the U.S. But the thing that I’ve learned is that there’s no

‘them.’ This is what everybody does: makes a distinction about ‘them.’  
It’s just us.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether upper case or lower case—it’s just us.

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It’s a beautiful picture:

to imagine a country or a community as bound together,  
no us and them...just us...but how far can we take it?

How far will such a picture go?

Look at our Psalm for today—Psalm 18—

the Psalmist most definitely looks out on the world—  
and sees not just them and us...but sees enemies!

“I call upon the Lord,” writes the Psalmist, “so I shall be saved  
from my enemies.”

“He reached down from on high,” the Psalmist says about God—  
“He delivered me from my strong enemy...”

The thing about Psalm 18 is that it’s no anomaly,  
it’s not an OUTLIER of a Psalm.

The Psalter is FULL of talk about enemies.

Do you know how many Psalms make reference to enemies?  
One-third. If you include “the wicked” or adversaries in that  
count, the number jumps to over half the Psalter!

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<sup>1</sup> “Ken Burns Still Has Faith in a Shared American Story,” by David Marchese, *The New York Times*, March 12, 2021.

As the late Eugene Peterson wrote:

“God is the primary subject in the Psalms, but enemies are established in solid second place.”<sup>2</sup>

So what do we do with all this enemy talk in the Psalms?

I’ll admit, it’s tempting to put it aside because it’s surely not very helpful to the particular place we find ourselves in this country at this moment. In the past 12 months, we’ve all walked through a global pandemic with limited social interaction, a divisive Presidential election, grief, uncertain futures, boredom and people taking sides over issues like racial equity, mask-wearing, and the ways in which institutions like church and school ought to reopen.

It’s one thing to disagree with someone else.

But do we REALLY want to go around labeling other people as enemies after all that everyone has walked through during this past year?

In fact, there’s a strong element of Christian faith that says the FIRST PLACE we look for the enemy is not OUT THERE but in here.

G.K. Chesterton was once asked by a British newspaper to contribute an essay on the subject, “What Is Wrong with the World?”

The question, the topic, was 6 words.

Chesterton wrote back with a 7-word essay:

What is wrong with the world? *Me.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by David Taylor, in *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*, Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> As cited in *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, by William Willimon, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.

On the one hand, it's a faithful inclination, an honest instinct, to say that we are our own worst enemies, that we are the ones who create our own separation and alienation from God and from one another.

On the other hand, it's naïve for us to imagine that the love and justice of God does not have enemies out there. Just take the horrible shootings in Atlanta this past week, or any act of terror perpetrated for any reason whatsoever...

To pretend that if we can just fix what's broken in our own hearts, and if we're just NICE enough people, opposition to the ways of God's love will magically disappear...it's magical thinking.

The love of God always has opposition.  
The love of God always has enemies.

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Peter Storey is a South African Methodist minister,  
and former chaplain to Nelson Mandela  
when Mandela was a prisoner on Robben Island.

Storey also was the head of the South African Council of Churches for a period of time. Back in the late 1980s, while Apartheid was still the law of the land, the headquarters for the SACC was at a place called Khotso House.

Khotso House was virtually the only haven in Johannesburg for Blacks who were victimized by apartheid laws. The Council of Churches and other groups in the building assisted Black South Africans who were harassed or detained by the security police, who were evicted from squatter housing, or who fell afoul of apartheid's complex laws.

In many cases, the Khotso House groups would sue government agencies on behalf of these people. Those who were oppressed by the white government regarded Khotso House as "a lighthouse" for "relief and refuge".

The building's name literally means "House of Peace" in Zulu.

But one day in 1988, it was not a house of peace.

A car bomb exploded outside the SACC headquarters, and the blast just RIPPED the front of Khotso house to shreds.

As Storey describes it:

"...in all the dust and debris, the great banner that hung in the foyer [of Khotso House] was exposed...: it portrays Jesus holding out his arms, offering his gift of peace to all the world."<sup>4</sup>

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Are any of us going to tell Peter Storey that God's love has no enemies?

Look, I don't like labels any more than you.

But I think we do our faith a GRAVE INJUSTICE if we try to paint the world as a place in which working for God's love and justice will never face conflict and opposition. If Christians are going to stand for God's love and justice and compassion and mercy, then there will be conflicts, there will be problems that are worth devoting our lives to solve...

So getting back to the Psalms, our struggle is not about whether enemies of God's love still exist today. Our struggle comes when people we know support positions—on today's very important moral

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Storey, "When the Cross Lays Hold on You," found in *Sermons from Duke Chapel: Voices from "A Great Towering Church,"* edited by William Willimon, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005.

and ethical issues—positions that you don't believe express your faith, or that are opposite of who you are.

After all, Jesus told us in no uncertain terms to love our enemies. Which I also think means that we're supposed to love difficult people, people with whom we disagree, people whom we cannot understand why they say the things they do on social media...

So what do we make of all this?

How do we reconcile  
 the Psalmist's praise at being rescued from enemies,  
 with other Psalms that cry out for vengeance on enemies,  
 with Jesus' instruction to love our enemies,  
 with the reality that none of us wants to think of the neighbor  
 down the street who has a bumper sticker on their car professing  
 something that we really have a problem with...we don't want to think  
 of our neighbor as our enemy—after all, we just had a lovely  
 conversation with that same neighbor the other day—but our neighbor  
 believes THAT????!

How do we bring all the scripture about enemies and conflict  
 together, tie it up nice and neat and say:

Here is how you and I live a faithful Christian life today...

This is the point in the sermon where I invite you to come and  
 preach the rest...

Look, when it comes to the subject of enemies, Scripture has no  
 easy answers, no formulas for us to follow.

I do know that I still don't like LABELS...

I do know that there still feels like a lot of DIVISION in our society today...division that traps people in shouting matches on tv or social media, or even around the dinner table...

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "...if we really want...to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. One might start with forgiving one's husband or wife, or parents or children...That will probably keep us busy at the moment."<sup>5</sup>

In the same way, when it comes to the subject of enemies, or even just of division and conflict and disagreement in the Christian life...I wonder if you and I need to start with something that's right in front of us, or with someone who is nearby.

One of my hopes for our congregation in the coming years is that we will CONTINUE to be a place where we can have difficult or challenging conversations with one another—and grow in our ability to talk with each other—about the ethical, moral, and social issues of our day.

Precisely because—we are NOT one another's enemy.  
We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Whether the topic is racial justice,  
or poverty and wealth,  
or immigration,  
or environmental stewardship—

how can we as a church continue to find our voice on these issues, but also HEAR one another's voices on these issues, and learn to talk with one another faithfully, when we know going into the conversation that we won't always see these issues the same way?

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1952,

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A few years ago on CNN, Anderson Cooper hosted a town hall on the subject of NFL players kneeling during the national anthem.

The most prominent and well-known person on his panel was Spike Lee. Lee spoke in favor of the player's rights to kneel during the anthem.

Then Cooper surprised Spike Lee by calling on a couple in the audience, a Gold Star family, a family who had lost a son in military combat. The father said that after a recent event honoring his son's sacrifice, he came home and turned on the tv and saw NFL players kneeling during the anthem, and it felt like a slap in the face.

Spike Lee replied that he was very sorry for that family's loss.

But that in their kneeling, the players weren't trying to disrespect the military or dishonor the sacrifice that his son had made.

To which the father said something else.

To which Spike Lee said something else.

And here's the problem:

At a made-for-tv town hall meeting, where one of the goals is to get as many viewers as you can, there's no room for building relationships. There's no room for trust and understanding. There's no room for sharing things in common.<sup>6</sup>

Which is why I think the Church has a vital role to play in our society today. The Church can create room for trust and understanding. The Church can create space where relationships can be built over time,

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Scott Black Johnston's second lecture at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary's mid-winter lecture series in 2021 for calling my attention to this town hall on CNN.

through shared worship and shared meals and shared mission trips. And the relationships we build become just as, if not more important than, the answers that we believe are right.

Getting back to our Psalm for just a moment...in verse 6, the Psalmist writes:

“In my distress I called upon the Lord...”

The Hebrew word here that gets translated “distress” is *zarar*, which literally means “narrow space”—a situation in which one is trapped. The antonym for *zarar* is “yasha”—which signifies “open space”...and can also be translated “salvation.”<sup>7</sup>

Do you remember what we heard today, in verse 19?

“He brought me out into a broad place...”—an open space!

God has moved the Psalmist from being trapped in a narrow space to being saved in a broad place.

What a marvelous image for God’s Church.

To create an open and safe space where we can speak with one another about the things that matter in our society. Listening and learning and sometimes disagreeing with each other, all while recognizing that we are committed to one community, bound to one another, claimed and called by the same Savior, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006.

A colleague recently recommended a short story which speaks to all this. It's a story that appeared not too long ago, written by an individual who goes by the pseudonym Scott Alexander.

The story is entitled, "Sort by Controversial."<sup>8</sup>

In the story, the narrator works at a small online advertising start-up. His team is charged with finding algorithms that produce statements and ads that receives the most positive clicks, the most forward likes, on social media.

His team does this job very well. But then they decide to flip the program on its head, and see if they can find an algorithm that will produce the most maximally controversial statements.

After some time, the computer spits out a list of 100 statements.

When the narrator reads the statements, he immediately reaches the conclusion that the algorithm has failed.

The statements do not sound controversial at all.

They are either clearly true, or definitely false.

So he goes to a co-worker to share his disappointment.

And the co-worker reads a statement...a statement that the narrator knows is false...and the co-worker cannot understand why the narrator thinks it's false, because it's most definitely true.

So as the narrator and the co-worker argue, they decide to take the question to others in the office—let them chime in. And other people in the office join in the fray...and the same thing happens. Some believe the statement is clearly false. Others say of course it's true. And things

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<sup>8</sup> I learned of this story in Scott Black Johnston's lecture, cited earlier. The story can be found at [Sort By Controversial | Slate Star Codex](#).

become acrimonious. People are yelling at one another, everyone is angry.

And before too long, this little argument starts to poison the well of the workplace.

Everything at the start-up falls apart.

There are lawsuits.

People are fired.

And then the narrator realizes that this algorithm wasn't a failure.

It succeeded spectacularly.

And then the narrator comes to another conclusion.

This algorithm was more than an innocuous programming device.

It was a weapon.

Something that could easily divide a community.

And the narrator names this algorithm, "The Scissor", because that's what it produced: "scissor statements".

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It seems to me that far too often, any of us can latch onto scissor statements that trap us, leaving no room for conversation to occur, no room for trust to be built. It's hard work to listen to someone else's truth and do everything in our power to engage. It's so much easier to just state our truth and then turn our back.

There's just one problem with that.

As best as I can tell, Jesus did not turn his back on anyone.

He did not give up on anyone.

Jesus did not shy away from conflict, to be sure.

But he also did not tell anyone that their voice did not matter, and ought not to be a part of the conversation.

Jesus prized relationships just as much as being right.

And he then built relationships with the ignored in his society, the outcast in his society, those on the margins of his society.

Jesus spent his ministry making sure that the voiceless would have a voice, and providing open space for all of God's children.

In fact, Jesus didn't just spend his life doing that.

He GAVE his life doing that.

Which raises an important question:

What about you and me?

What about God's Church?

Amen.