

# Listening to Enemies

February 6, 2011  
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## Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words

We are here  
*after days of no electrical power for many*  
and days of ordinary power for others,  
*to worship, to ponder past our frustrations,*  
to push past the fleeting for the enduring,  
*and to challenge ourselves*  
that we might grow in spirit and courage.

**And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection, as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.**

**Affirmation**, adapted from Stephen Levine  
If prayer would do it, I'd pray.  
If reading would do it, I'd be almost through the library.  
If discourse would do it, I'd be sitting with a saint.  
If contemplation would do it, I'd have translated the Periodic Table into poetry.  
If fighting would do it, I'd already be a blackbelt.  
If anything other than love could do it, I'd have done it already and left the hardest to last.

## Sequence

It's February. A month for Egyptians to protest both the regime and each other's opinions.  
It's February. A month for Presidents' birthdays. Yet Lincoln connects me to Cairo, for he said: *Any people anywhere being inclined and having the power have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better.* (Jan. 12, 1848, speech in House of Representatives)  
It's February. A month of New Year and Chinese dragons dancing in the streets.  
It's February. A month set aside for the much-touted Game of all games.  
Yet the Superbowl *connects* me to the Chinese New Year, each a much anticipated festivity that some love but which is lost on others, each a burst of energy in the drooping winter.  
It's February of the mythic groundhog, a story told to remind us the cold is almost past despite the witness of our shivering.  
It's February of the ancient rite of Candlemas, Imbolc, Purification, lights kindled to remind us that the longer daylight is soon to be restored.

Yet the candles connect me to the groundhog, for both remind me that the seasons, like the waters of great rivers, come and go, come and go, and are not controlled by my wants or needs. It's February. It's Sunday. And together, they connect me, and connect you, to the Silence.

silence

It's February, and we are connected to each other by our will, and to our families by blood and choice, and to our friends by affection, and to our foes by reality. Knowing we are of a piece with all humankind, we come now to a time when we can mark with honor and respect the ties that bind us to those we love and remember, naming them quietly in our hearts or whispered aloud, all that we be not accidental but deliberate in our loving.

naming

It's February, which, like every other month, brings us to celebration and to music.

**The First Reading** comes from Karen Armstrong's latest book, *Twelve Steps to a More Compassionate Life*, published just last month. Karen Armstrong, a former Catholic nun who now teaches at both Jewish and Muslim academies, describes herself as an agnostic.

There is much talk of the need for dialogue as a way of improving international relations. But are we prepared to "make a place for the other," or are we determined simply to impose our own will? An essential part of the dialogue must be the effort to listen. We have to make a serious effort to hear one another's narratives. All too often, when enemies start to tell their story, the other side interrupts, shouts them down, objects, and denounces it as false and inaccurate. But a story often reflects the inner meaning of an event rather than factual, historical accuracy. As any psychoanalyst knows, stories of pain, betrayal, and atrocity give expression to the emotional dimension of an episode, which is just as important to the speaker as what actually happened. We need to listen to the undercurrent of pain in our enemy's story. And we should be aware that our version of the same event is also likely to be a reflection upon our own situation and suffering rather than a dispassionate and wholly factual account.

**The Second Reading** is a personal testimony from the Pentecostal Christian Theologian Miroslav Volf, who now teaches at Yale Divinity School. This comes from the preface to a book by an Evangelical Christian pastor named Brian Zahnd, called *Unconditional*, which is the most remarkable text on the topic of forgiveness that I have ever read.

I grew up the son of a Croatian Pentecostal minister. After my own brief stint as a "prodigal," I was baptized and became a committed Pentecostal. As a young man I was active, but that began to change when I arrived in California in the fall of 1977 and encountered American Pentecostalism.

I stumbled upon over-the-top flamboyant TV evangelists. I was shocked by the strange spectacle. Preachers were peddling a compromised gospel of wealth, wealth and power, which believers had a right to claim as their own by a simple act of faith. That seemed to me a faith designed not to direct peoples striving toward God and neighbor, but to feed the hole of their self-absorption and greed. And then came the “war against terror” and the obsession with security. After 9/11, America was gripped by the spirit of “kick-butt” culture. Many Pentecostals, along with many evangelicals, believed the war was really a face-off between Yahweh of the Bible, and Allah of the Quran.

This was not the Pentecostal faith of the Azusa Street Revival, the first generation of Pentecostals. And this was not the faith I learned from my father. He never prayed that God would shower blessings on the poor, but that we would be generous to them. And he reminded me more than once that Jesus commanded his followers to love their neighbors, including their enemies. In his old age, he insisted that an Albanian Muslim, for who he worked when he was young, was “the best man for whom I have ever worked.”

### **Sermon**

I think it’s best to start off with the last line of the affirmation, which I adapted for this service from a poem by Stephen Levine. *If anything other than love could do it, I’d have done it already and left the hardest to last.* I trembled when I first read that line, and realized its wisdom would rightfully challenge me.

And Levine’s words are a lovely way of saying that wrestling with all of this, the competing ideas associated with the words *love*, *enemy* and *listening*, is tremendously hard. Hard for me to express with unmistakable clarity. Hard, I have to imagine, for you, and me, to hear without necessary and welcome resistance, + lists of exceptions.

That being said, let’s get going.

When I announce a sermon title in the newsletter...I find it intriguing that I always end up *hearing* one of the key words in that title *over and over* the week before I step into this pulpit. This week, I must have heard the word “enemy” in one form or another a dozen times. I heard, while just flipping channels late one night, the talking head Glenn Beck call the religion of Islam, America’s “cunning enemy.” Moments later I heard Rachel Maddow on MSNBC use a variant word, “frenemy”---a fusion of the word friend and the word enemy--- while talking about certain nations in the Middle East. Later that day, over at Panera, I heard a teenager use the same word “frenemy” to describe her relationship to one of her cousins. In the middle of the night when I couldn’t sleep, I turned on the TV again, only to immediately hear Sarah Jessica Parker, on her show about dating in New York, refer to a former boyfriend as a “frenemy.” Changing channels, I ran across the great film from the 60s, “Man for All Seasons.” There sat the glowering Orson Wells, playing Cardinal Wolsey in the days of Henry VIII. Wolsey, all dressed in red, has just finished arguing with Sir Thomas More over the issue of obtaining a divorce for Henry. More refuses to support him. Wolsey looks at More ruefully and says, “Come down to earth. Until you do, you and I are enemies, Thomas.”

Enemy. Clearly the word is just plain difficult. That someone joined the two words “friend” and “enemy” to make the word “frenemy” shows that very clearly. And remember? In our morning’s story, our hero calls his new neighbor, Jeremy Ross, his “best enemy.” Why? Because Jeremy laughed at him when he struck out at bat, and Jeremy didn’t invite him to a party. There the word “enemy” seems pretty shallow, since these are, in the scheme of things, rather petty offences. Yet the boy’s father seems to know this when he offers to bake a pie to rectify the situation, an *enemy pie*, as he calls it. But, “There is one part of enemy pie I can’t do,” he then says to his son. “In order for it to work, you need to spend a day with your enemy. Are you *sure* you want to do this?”

And of course, his son nods yes. And wouldn’t you know it. By getting to know this enemy he doesn’t like, he *gains* a new and very good friend. This approach to the word *enemy* reminds me of Abraham Lincoln, who once said of a man he knew, “I don’t like that man. I must get to know him better.” In fact, President Lincoln was famous for trying to turn enemies into friends, going so far as to put some of them on his cabinet. And he and Stephen Douglas, in their famous Illinois debates, came across as bitter enemies...in fact, Lincoln and Douglas were good friends off the playing field of politics. Not just people sitting next to each other “across the aisle” as noted at our *State of the Union*, but real friends, who actively looked out for the welfare of each other’s families.

And in a book I am reading with some others in this congregation, I found these autobiographical words by Thomas Merton, the great Trappist monk: “There was this shadow, this double, this writer, who had followed me into the cloister. He is still on my track, he rides my shoulders, I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is he my enemy?”

Of course, Merton became *well-known* for his writing over the years, even though that’s not the ordinary practice for Trappist monks. It sounds to me that Merton felt as if he had two opposing selves inside him. Since he identified with being a monk, not a writer, he thought of his temp-tation to write as the work of an enemy. But it was only, I think, just another part of himself.

But of course the word “enemy” doesn’t always refer to someone you do not like, or with whom you disagree, or who is your opposite, either out in the world or within your struggling soul. For example, I may disagree with some historian about a certain point, such as whether the biblical David was a real king of a young nation, or just a Hebrew version of Robin Hood. But I can’t imagine calling someone who disagrees with me “my enemy.” But when the right-wing evangelical pastor I referred to last week, the USA preacher Scott Lively, says cruel and absurd things, I wonder if *enemy* is not the best term to describe him, even though I don’t know him. For example, Pastor Lively rants, without evidence of any kind, that Adolf Hitler and the entire Gestapo were gay, and that, therefore, he is right to try and save the nation of Uganda from being taken over by these wildly violent and sick sex-fiends. Hmm, I guess I really have no problem with calling Lively my enemy.

And of course, this is like the bitter enmity that Martin Luther King had to deal with in his life. The words he heard from the lynchers and segregationists of his day were just as absurd, hurtful, twisted and cruel. King heard words that were so foul that I admire his fortitude in enduring enemies around him every day.

Yet he preached a sermon one day at the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, back in 1957, called *Loving Your Enemies*. He had a terrible cold that day, but still, it was a *dynamite* sermon. He admitted that for many, Jesus' famous dictum to "love your enemies" was "impractical" and worse, "proof" as he said, that just like Sir Thomas More in the movie *Man for All Seasons*, Jesus needed to "come down to earth" and stop all this idealism nonsense. Many people who think the word "love" means to *like*, or somehow even *excuse* someone, feel the same way. These people are asking me if I could "like" someone like Scott Lively? Or if you could "like" someone who speaks against you? How can anyone "like" someone who is oppressing you, lashing out at you, ridiculing you, and worse, mocking you, for what you stand for and even, for who you *are*? King insists that Jesus' words are *not* some sort of "Oriental exaggeration," but *practical*, and an "*absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization.*" Strong words.

Brian Zahnd and Miroslav Volf seem to agree. As I said, Zahnd's book is the single strongest case for unconditional forgiveness that I have ever read. Powerful, it centers on the same text that King lifted up. Now, frankly, Zahnd and I disagree about many things. He is an evangelical Christian and I am not. He is against gay marriage, I am not. He regards the Bible as God's word; I see it as very human. We differ in a few other areas too. But he is not my enemy. His book is filled with unwavering respect and kindness, no sneaky manipulation. There is no ranting, just a true reaching out for understanding from within his religious perspective, taken seriously and not superficially. That is why teaching minister, Miroslav Volf, raised in the fastest growing religion in the world, Pentecostalism, loved the book as much as I did. He too wants to take his religious principles seriously. He too thinks that religion is about the care of human beings, not a rollicking circus entertainment. He too is disgusted with what happened to the original Pentecostal fervor, radically multi-racial and experiential in practice, that erupted on Azusa Street in Los Angeles so many decades ago in 1906. It all started with the great five-year long revival led by a certain Rev. Seymore. Volf knows *that* Pentecostalism. He is not at all happy with the American TV examples of Pentecostal fervor like Benny Hinn who slaps people with his suit-coat to "heal" them in a theatrical frenzy, or the now rampant "wealth and prosperity" Pentecostalism, invented only decades ago by Oral Roberts of Tulsa, and now enriching preachers like Mike Murdock, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Marilyn Hickey, Morris Cerullo and our own local Rod Parsley. Volf and Zahnd both are not happy with the anti-Muslim, anti-gay rants popular among these preachers, and he wonders why anyone would see whole categories of people as "enemies" in the first place. Volf remembers his father, who revered his Muslim boss, and the Pentecostalism of his own non-American Croatian roots, which was not about demonizing others, and tearing them down, but about enlivening experience and real concern for how we might live out the values of the Sermon on the Mount, *including the words* "Love you enemies."

But how do you do that? How do you love your enemies? Does loving them mean trying to see if what they say has any merit? King asked this question too, of course. But King does not advise finding merit in your enemy's ideas if that idea is that you yourself are a worthless pile of manure. King was not a fool. But I think Karen Armstrong translates King's reflection in modern language that transcends any particular religion, since she claims none.

Armstrong agrees with Levine that loving one's enemies is the hardest thing it's possible to do. In her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, she places "love of enemies" as the last step, #12, agreeing with Stephen Levine that "love is left to last." But she insists that in order to love, there has to be conversation, that is, dialogue. Then she says this: the "essential part of the dialogue *must be the effort to listen*. We have to make a serious *effort* to hear one another's narratives. All too often, when enemies start to tell their story, the other side interrupts, shouts them down, objects, and denounces it as false and inaccurate. But a story often reflects the inner meaning of an event rather than factual, historical accuracy. As any psychoanalyst knows, stories of pain, betrayal, and atrocity give expression to the emotional dimension of an episode, which is just as important to the speaker as what actually happened. We need to listen to the undercurrent of pain in our enemy's story. And we should be aware that *our* version of the same event is *also* likely to be a reflection upon our own situation and suffering rather than a dispassionate and wholly factual account."

Wow. This is powerful and difficult stuff, no question. I tried to make that clear at the beginning of this sermon, and composing this sermon has only underscored my initial intuition about this theme. But I think what she says is worth wrestling with.

Listening, huh? Take the example I offered earlier. If Scott Lively was willing to talk with me, and not preach *at* me, I would try to make the effort to hear his story, his life. I would bet that there is some tale of violation there in his life. When I hear the vile things he says, I am hearing, I think, echoes of vile things that happened in his own life. Inexcusable things. Violent things. I hear tremendous projection on his part. For years I have said over and over again that I simply don't have the power to believe that someone like Lively reads a passage of scripture...and *because of that alone*, musters up all of this cruel preaching and distorted history. I don't have enough faith to believe that anyone reads a text, and abracadabra, becomes a spiritual maniac. Instead, taking Karen Armstrong seriously, I am hearing him say that his own life has been cruelly distorted by something. I can guess, sure, but I am not going to do that here. I would rather listen than conjecture. Now, obviously, he and I are not sitting across from each other, I know. It's already a lot of conjecture on my part. But after 37 years of doing this work, I've noted a few patterns, heard a thousand parallel stories, and if I could get the courage, or even, I admit, the stomach, to talk to this man, and if he was willing to fairly converse instead of preach *at* me, I would guess that is what I would find. I would still stand against his violent words in Uganda and fight against his cruelty if he continued it. But I would do so, I hope, less from a stance of vengeance and hatred, and a bit more from a vantage of encountering another human being...who, like me, like you, has not passed through life unwounded himself.

See? Levine was right. We can pray, read, talk, contemplate or fight all we want. We could even bake an enemy pie if we had the recipe. But at the very end, like at the very beginning, we are left with the challenge of love, listening to our enemies to find the deeper answer to the basic religious question, “What indeed does it mean to love?”

### **Offering**

During this time, we provide an opportunity for our generosity. We know we find other ways, and other times as well, but for many, this time is important, grounded as it is in our community. The morning offering will now be given and received.

### **Prayer**

My prayer is no magic trick,  
an abracadabra to get something for myself.  
I ask for no showers of blessings on those I love,  
nor do I plead with Power for power.  
My prayer is that I might be open to you  
and to strangers and people whose opinions  
irk me to the bone. Open to them,  
not filled with myself. Not naïve, but open.  
My prayer is that my hand might be open,  
without gun or sword or text in it,  
that I might shake another hand.  
My prayer is that my ears may be open to hear past words and deep into experience.  
My prayer is that my mind might be open to wonder past the certainties I cling to, open to  
spirit. Love, my light and life, open my eyes  
that I might see, my ears that I might hear,  
and my heart, that I might live in the world...  
with you.