

In the Presence of My Enemies
Sermon on Esther 7:1-6, 9-10 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, October 1, 2006

Those who recall the dark days of the Watergate era remember that President Nixon maintained an enemies list. It turns out that the U.S. government itself maintains an official enemies list. Called “Country Reports on Terrorism,” the enemies list is a report compiled by the State Department detailing security threats in different countries throughout the world. The Country Reports on Terrorism for 2005 named six countries as state sponsors of terrorism: Cuba, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria. Groups listed as Foreign Terrorist Organizations include familiar names such as Al-Qaida, Hamas, Hizballah, and Islamic Jihad, as well as less familiar names such as Jemaah Islamiya, the Palestine Liberation Front, and Shining Path. There are 42 terrorist organizations on the State Department’s enemies list, in addition to 41 other organizations labeled “Groups of Concern.”¹

The conclusions of the report’s Strategic Assessment are striking. While claiming, for instance, that Al-Qaida has been diminished as a terrorist organization and its operations disrupted, the report acknowledges that the group is “adaptive and resilient.” The authors conclude, “Overall, we are still in the first phase of a potentially long war. The enemy’s proven ability to adapt means we will probably go through several more cycles of action/reaction before the war’s outcome is no longer in doubt. It is likely that we will face a resilient enemy for years to come.”

This report on terrorism confirms what we already know: the world can be, and often is, a dangerous and violent place. The news media, like the State Department, would have us believe that the world is full of threats, both potential and actual: the threat of crime in our

¹ United States Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Anti-Terrorism: Country Reports for Terrorism 2005 (U.S. State Department Publication 11324) at <http://www.mipt.org/pdf/Country-Reports-Terrorism-2005.pdf>.

neighborhoods, the threat of terrorism in our country, the threat of war among nations. We live in a time of heightened alertness, if not alarm. We are becoming conditioned to suspect people of foreign extraction, be they from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or Central American countries. We question the motives and actions and loyalties of people with different last names and skin colors and religious traditions. We exist in the presence of our enemies.

In light of this situation, two questions occur to me: First, should it be thus for Christians, that is, ought Christians to have enemies? Second, if Christians do have enemies, how are we called to respond to them?

In order to answer the question of whether Christians ought to have enemies, perhaps we should begin by observing that ever since God created, called, and covenanted with a people for himself, those chosen people have encountered opposition and enmity. The story from Esther is a case in point. Although it is a fictional account dressed up as history (today we might call it a historical novel), nevertheless it points to something true about the experience of God's people.

The story takes place in the Persian Empire, in the court of King Ahasuerus. After a domestic dispute with his first wife, the king held a beauty contest to find a second wife. (The Bible actually suggests that the contest was of a rather more "intimate" nature, but this being a family worship service, I cannot say more.) A beautiful young woman named Esther attracted the king's attention, and she became queen. After a few years, the king hired a man called Haman and quickly promoted him through the ranks until he became grand vizier. Everyone who reported to Haman came bowing and scraping, everyone that is, except Esther's cousin, a man named Mordecai, a mid-level government official.

Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman infuriated the vizier and wounded his pride. When he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, Haman decided to play the race card and pursue a

policy of ethnic cleansing, all in the name of national security. One day during a staff meeting, Haman said to the king, “It might interest you to know that there is a certain people scattered throughout all the peoples of your kingdom; ‘their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction....’” (Esther 3:8-9). And with that, a decree went out “giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, ... and to plunder their goods” (Esther 3:13).

Is this sounds eerily, horribly familiar, it should. It is government policy based on the politics of fear, a politics as old as humanity and as current as events at home and abroad. “Their laws are different,” and so they must be “re-educated,” whether in Soviet gulags, Chinese farm communes, or American internment camps. “They do not keep the king’s laws,” and so they must be forced into slavery, or forced into ethnic ghettos, or forced to pin stars to their clothing. “It is not appropriate to tolerate them” and so they should be detained or deported, threatened or tortured, kidnapped or killed, marginalized or massacred. Governments employ the politics of fear because it works. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn says, “In order to rally people, governments need enemies. They want us to be afraid, to hate, so we will rally behind them. And if they do not have a real enemy, they will invent one in order to mobilize us.”

Haman had indeed invented an enemy and mobilized the Persian Empire in a genocidal campaign to eliminate the Jews. As they had in Egypt and as they would in Nazi Germany, the Jews faced certain and complete annihilation in a government-sponsored pogrom. What stood in the way was one human being, who upon learning the facts became convinced the system was unjust, and decided to risk her life for the sake of her people. Esther, beauty queen become a true queen, approached the king and spoke truth to power, saying, “[W]e have been sold, I and

my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated” (Esther 7:4). Here was a woman regarded only for her looks, a woman who enjoyed wealth and privilege and power, the consummate insider, who realized the truth of the matter and stepped forward to say no. All it takes is one: One student to stand in front of a tank in Tienanmen Square. One preacher to say he had a dream. One woman to sit at the front of a bus. One lawyer to practice nonviolence. One theologian to defy a tyrant. One man to die on a cross.

The man who died on a cross recognized that, like God’s people Israel, the people who followed him would have enemies. He himself had enemies—government officials who thought he was a threat to law and order, military officials who thought he was a threat to national security, religious officials who thought he was a threat to the religious customs and institutions of the day. Jesus had enemies, and he knew it. Yet he didn’t put them on a list and assess their potential threat level. He didn’t call for their assassination or even their removal from office. He didn’t call down God’s wrath or send in legions of angels to destroy them.

Jesus called for love: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt. 5:43-44). Like Will Willimon, I can’t remember the last time I said a prayer for the soul of Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden.² Yet from the cross Jesus, loving us till the end, prayed for his enemies, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34).

And he called for goodness. Speaking to his disciples he said, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Lk. 6:27-28). When have I sent a check to buy food for starving and displaced people in Sudan, people the State Department says are my enemies? When have I

² William H. Willimon, *Thank God It’s Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006) 5.

spoken out on behalf of the people of Palestine, people the State Department suspects of sponsoring terror? Yet from the cross, itself the symbol of state-sponsored terrorism, and loving us to the end, Jesus did good that Good Friday, blessing those who cursed him and praying for those who abused him.

There on that cross Jesus conquered the enemy of sin: the sin of hatred and violence born of fear. There on that cross Jesus defeated the enemy of death: the death we inflict on others in the name of national security and self-interest. There on that cross Jesus made peace with the God against whom we are constantly rebelling. There on that cross Jesus made peace with warring humanity. As Ephesians puts it, “[Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (2:14).

And so, in the presence of my enemies, I am called and enabled by God’s Holy Spirit to love and pray and do good and forgive. In the presence of my enemies I am called and enabled by God’s Holy Spirit to see and speak the truth, to recognize in the stranger not a foe, but a friend. In the presence of my enemies I am called and enabled by God’s Holy Spirit to be at peace with my neighbor. In the presence of my enemies God is there, loving, reconciling, making peace. In the presence of my enemies God is there.