

Bridges of Understanding

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Text: Matthew 5:43-46

"Love your enemy." Can Jesus be serious? I was born in 1941, the year the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. As World War II progressed, the Germans occupied much of Europe and the holocaust was taking place. Did Jesus mean we are to love the Japanese and the Germans?

Well, that's not so hard today, is it? In fact, if your congregation is like mine, a good many members are driving cars and watching televisions or VCRs made by these people we once considered our enemies.

Today when we hear the word "enemy," we think of one country, the Soviet Union. Even though the rhetoric has cooled and there seems to be the possibility of improved relations since the December Washington summit and the signing of the INF treaty, the Soviet Union is still our enemy. And we are theirs.

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." This is a very difficult assignment Jesus has given us!

In 1956 at the height of the cold war, some church leaders were struggling with this very verse of scripture. In an attempt to take it seriously, they initiated the first visit of church leaders in the United States to the church of the enemy—the Russian Orthodox Church. Their hope was the common belief in Jesus Christ could help break through the fears and stereotypes the peoples of each country felt for the other. That year a small and very fragile bridge was begun, and it has been maintained and strengthened by continued communications and exchanges of visits through the years regardless of the political ups and downs.

In 1983 the cold war was at another high point—in fact, the intermediate range missiles were being installed in Europe at that time, thus reducing the response time to a perceived nuclear attack to a mere twenty minutes. The Presbyterians, again in an attempt to take our scripture today seriously, sent a group of 40 people—lay people and clergy from all over the United States—to visit their Christian brothers and sisters behind the Iron Curtain. I was part of that group. The experience was so significant to me that I have devoted a good bit of my time and energy during the last five years to helping others have such an experience by being a group leader for the journeys that have taken place each summer. Each trip has added to the strength of that fragile bridge of reconciliation begun in 1956.

It is hard for me to believe all that has happened since my first journey in 1983—to me personally, to the people of the United States in terms of increased knowledge and interest in Soviet Christians, and in the Soviet Union in terms of signs of new openness and change under Gorbachev!

It was with a great deal of fear and ambiguity that I went on that first

journey to the land of my enemy in May 1983. I will never forget getting on the plane in Durham—leaving my husband and two children, ages eleven and thirteen. The tears were streaming down my face. I was on my way for three days of orientation in New York City and then on to Moscow with forty people I did not even know. *Had I lost my mind?* For as long as I can remember, I have hated and feared the Russians. As a young girl living in Columbia, South Carolina, I had to call my parents to come get me while visiting relatives near Charleston, because my cousin told me the Russians were coming and would take me away from my parents. And later when I was a college student, the Cuban missile crisis threatened to end all my dreams for the future. The Soviet Union was definitely not on the top of my list of “places I’ve always wanted to visit.”

I had read and studied a lot in preparation for the journey. I remember being shocked at the vastness of this country. There are eleven time zones, and 120 different languages are spoken. I knew this would be a stretching experience. I knew it would be educational. What I was not prepared for was that it would be a religious experience!

The first thing I learned about our enemy the Soviet Union is that we have many brothers and sisters in Christ living there. The church is very much alive in that country whose government professes atheism. In fact, there are 18 million members of the communist party, and there are between 40 and 60 million Christians, more than three times as many Christians as party members.

More profound than the number of Christians is the experience of worshipping with them. The worship services last for three hours. There are no pews. We worshipped in packed congregations standing shoulder to shoulder. Under these very different circumstances, the music and liturgy penetrated to the depths of my being and enabled me to praise God in a powerful and moving way. I wrote my family after celebrating Easter in a church in Moscow, “Jesus Christ has never risen for me the way he did this day!” That was an experience I did not expect in the land of my enemy!

Let me be quick to say that the church has not had an easy time since the revolution in 1917. There has been much persecution and repression of the church, particularly during the Stalin years and again in the 1960s under Nikita Khrushchev.

In the last twelve to fifteen years, pressure from the government has let up, and there is a renewed sense of hope. Last summer we visited St. Daniel’s Monastery in the heart of Moscow. It is a monastery built in the 1200s which was taken over by the government in 1917 but returned to the church by Brezhnev from his deathbed. Presently it is being renovated to be the headquarters of the church. As we marveled at the work in progress, the priest who was guiding us proudly said, “Here you will feel the atmosphere of the Russian Church—the new hope we feel!”

Yes, the church has had a hard time, but it has also endured and has had a long, strong history. In 1988 the Russian Orthodox Church is celebrating 1000 years of Christianity in this land of our enemy! I am reminded of a marvelous quote: “Two things increase in value when stepped on—Oriental rugs

and the Church!"

The second impression from my visits to the Soviet Union is that this enemy of ours is a land of suffering people. Their history is filled with stories of suffering and endurance. In this century World War II was particularly brutal to the Soviet people. I cannot overemphasize what a strong influence that war had on the lives, the hopes, and the fears of these people. Twenty million of their people died. Ten thousand towns were destroyed. As I have met with people over the last five summers in Moscow, Leningrad, Rostov, Yalta, Volgograd, Tashkent, Yerevan, Tbilisi, Odessa, and Kiev—everywhere I have been—our group often asked, "How many of you lost a family member in the War?" Rarely would a single hand go unraised!

Twenty million is such a big number; it is really hard to grasp. That number became more meaningful to me after I read an article in the Durham paper upon returning home from my first trip. It was Memorial Day and the article was a folksy one about celebrating that holiday. It spoke of cookouts, picnics, and other ways of enjoying the holiday. But at the end it said, "Let us not forget the reason we have this holiday—to remember the 1,000,000 young men who have given their lives in war during the history of this country, from the Revolutionary War to the present day." Please don't misunderstand me. I don't want to diminish the loss of any one of these 1,000,000, and I'm grateful for the freedom we have in this country. However, the contrast of the numbers when our populations are approximately the same *did* make the fact that 20,000,000 died in the Soviet Union during World War II even more poignant.

I firmly believe these people do not want war—any more than we do. They know all too well the pain and horror of war.

And yet we keep arming ourselves to the hilt. Both countries, at the expense of pressing human need and large deficits to burden our children, keep building bigger and better weapons. The INF treaty is a sign of hope, hopefully a first step in a new direction. But even when those intermediate range weapons are destroyed, we will still have enough fire power to destroy human life as we know it—not once, but many times over.

I reflected on this as we as a nation paused to remember the flight crew of the Challenger Space Shuttle on the second anniversary of that awful tragedy. I ached again for those seven men and women and for their families. What a tragedy! There they were: one minute fulfilling a dream, excited and exhilarated as they raced toward the heavens; then, poof, they were gone. Who will ever forget that image we saw over and over on our televisions of the space shuttle lifting off into the sky and then the explosion?

That's what you and I and all we love would be like if the Soviet Union and the United States used a few of their nuclear weapons—one minute picking up a car pool, fixing supper for the family, or sharing memories with old friends; and the next minute, nothing.

"Love your enemy" is a tall order that Jesus has given us, but, just as many of his commandments, it is given for our own good.

I don't expect any of us to change our attitude overnight. But by reading and through studies such as the church is involved in now, in getting to know about the history and lives of these Soviet people, we can begin to realize that

we are all a part of God's large family.

I have a vision that the church can be God's instrument for changing our views of each other. Let me share a story I heard recently: In an ancient eastern country, there was a tradition that the estate of the family was divided among the children in a certain way—one-half to the oldest child, one-third to the second child, and one-ninth to the youngest child. There was a man who owned seventeen camels. When he died there was much bickering among his children. How would they divide the camels? The math is difficult, not to mention what it does to the camels! Finally, in desperation, the three children went to the local priest. The wise old priest quietly said, "I have one camel. Why don't you take it?" And he gave them his camel.

So now, with eighteen camels the oldest child took one-half or nine. The second child took one-third or six. And the youngest took one-ninth or two. To their amazement, the sum was seventeen. Then they took the eighteenth camel back to the priest.

My hope and my prayer is that we, the church of Jesus Christ, can be as the eighteenth camel in this broken, hurting, warring world God loves so much!

By following Christ we may learn what he means when he asks us to love our enemy. Our common faith with many in the land of the enemy gives us the opportunity of celebrating together our belief in Jesus Christ, and that faith can cast out fear.

For Christ is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14).