



Dear Folks,

In our Gospel today, Jesus teaches us unconditional love, even our enemies. If people know anything about Christianity, they know we are to love one another. This is wonderfully easy to say. It is much harder to do. The first issue is spiritual. There are some people it is easy to want to love, while others, who can be so aggravating, are much more difficult. It is hard to empathize with someone who has caused pain, difficulty, or harm, and seems not to care about it.

It helps to pray for such people. It always begins with seeking God's help. It is good to remember the goal: not to destroy the person but purge the evil from them and rejoice with them in heaven. God says, "Do I find pleasure in the death of the wicked—oracle of the Lord God? Do I not rejoice when they turn from their evil way and live? (Ezekiel 18:23; Ezekiel 33:11; Luke 15:7)." The more focused we are on the eternal goals the more we can handle worldly problems.

Another problem is practical. In Christianity love is not a feeling but a decision to seek the good of others for their own sake.

In Ann Garrido's excellent book "Redeeming Conflict" habit #4 is "Undo the knot of intention." Good intentions don't necessarily mean good consequences, and bad consequences don't necessarily mean bad intentions. It is harder. I have learned, again and again, that I can intend to do good and have it not work well. Now, God will judge our hearts, and if we are doing our best, that is having a loving heart. That said, if we do less than our best to find out if we are really doing good, I don't think that will go well. Doing parish work, I've found that there are some people who focus their energy and skill in getting resources from helping agencies, and they can refine that to an art. I think about what they could do if they put that intelligence and energy into doing something constructive. Some people say to just give them money, and if they misuse it, "that's on them." Is that really seeking others' good, or is that about making ourselves feel good? Someone referred to one such person as "he helps the poor to stay poor, because he needs them to be poor." I know that sometimes I risk being taken. I'm quite sure I do get taken from time to time, but we can't close our hearts in an effort to be safe. One thing I'm sure of, we don't want to be in the position of explaining to God why we didn't try (Matthew 25:14-46). Sometimes the aggravation is part of the price for loving our neighbor. Direct help in emergencies is great; helping people who cannot help themselves is great; when we can help people move themselves into a better situation where they can flourish, that is better. I love our community dinners and our food pantries; sometimes getting a meal from someone who treats you with courtesy, kindness and respect can make all the difference. I love Habitat for Humanity, because people who participate in their program tend to flourish more afterward. I love Have Mercy, the program for the homeless in Montcalm and Ionia counties. They give a great deal of immediate help and will regularly move homeless people into permanent homes. I love Alpha Family Center who help people in a uniquely vulnerable time in their lives, giving help they can be grateful for for the rest of their lives. There are some many good things being done, and I hope we can learn more and more ways to help people in need. We don't ask if they deserve it; we ask what is truly helpful. How to be helpful is something we can spend the rest of our lives learning and practicing.

If we dedicate ourselves to helping people we don't know and can do nothing for us, maybe that will strengthen our ability to love even the people who harm us.

Blessings,
Fr. Jim