

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### UCC09 Suffolk Association Meeting

Mt 5:38-48

*"Enemies"*

Christians in the Reformed, Evangelical and Congregational traditions do not generally take "non-violent" to mean pacifist in the way, say, Anabaptists do. We generally hold to some form of "just war" theory in international disputes, and in domestic matters we uphold the magistrates and constables as God-given restraint on evil in society. In short, we follow thinkers like Calvin and Niebuhr in believing that the Christian command to "love your enemy" becomes, in the social sphere, a command to *pursue justice*. Former President Jimmy Carter is the only overtly Christian president I have ever heard explain in just these terms how his faith translated into public policy. "Love your neighbor," or even more notably "love your enemy," becomes "seek justice."

So we support a justice system as necessary and beneficial, even as we acknowledge that every real system is broken - or fallen, to put it in biblical language. Lord knows the American criminal justice system needs reform from top to bottom: despite incarcerating a higher percentage of our population than any other modern nation, we are still plagued with violence at every level, and our prisoners generally emerge worse than they went in. Our police forces are over-stretched, and in some places perform poorly. Our jails and our courts are

overflowing, our judges and legal aid attorneys are overwhelmed. Despite our best efforts, street violence, gang violence, school violence, domestic violence, persist.

And as we should all understand by now, these are problems that lie beyond policing - they are embedded at deep levels in our culture. While we tolerate and even celebrate violence as entertainment; while our society is awash with weapons and with drugs; when pornography has gone mainstream; it is no wonder that violence is engrained in our domestic lives, in our schools, on our streets. These things go deep, and no amount of policing or community activism will reach the broken families, the broken lives, the fear and helplessness and the inner demons that make people lash out at others.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn penned a sentence about his experience in the Soviet gulags that everyone should know: (paraphrasing) "*Bless you prison, for teaching me that the line separating good and evil does not run along the boundary of nations; not along the boundary of the Party; not along the wall of the prison; but right through the middle of every human heart.*" Only when we have learned what the limits of "the justice system" are, can we begin to deal with the roots of injustice - in the attitudes and dreams and hopes and fears and prejudices and beliefs of ordinary people.

And surely Christians are supposed to have something to say at this point. We may work to reform the institutions, or make our communities better for everyone, and we should; but we must also work to heal the people who commit the violence that mars our communal life.

How? The Christian answer is both very simple in concept, apparently naive, and extremely difficult to do. The command of Jesus is to pursue *reconciliation and forgiveness*. Of course our hackles often rise at this point! What, forgive Al Qaeda? What, forgive the man who molested my daughter? Are you kidding? You are too naive to be allowed out on the street? Well - OK; agreed that in many hard cases *justice* has to come before reconciliation. But *reconciliation* is the only final answer.

There are many violence issues that seem to me to fall in the range of the extraordinary words that Jesus is reported to have uttered during his crucifixion: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" I will confess that I have wrestled more with that text than any other in recent years, as I have confronted at close hand one form of brokenness and violence that wrecks families. "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing." There is admittedly a gap between "Father, forgive them" and "I forgive you." That is only one of the hard things about Jesus' teaching on how to deal with violence and evil.

But the truth remains that violence does not end until there is reconciliation and forgiveness. And that has to work at the one-to-one level between husbands and wives, between partners of all kinds, between parents and children; and it has to work upwards to neighborhood and community levels. Pastor Walter touched in his recent *Newsday* editorial on the work Desmond Tutu did in South Africa with the *Truth and*

*Reconciliation Commission*, which achieved astonishing things in bringing former enemies to the table to speak the truth about their actions and attitudes, and through that honesty to reach towards reconciliation and forgiveness.

I'm sure I don't have to remind you, although I often have to explain this to people in counseling, that forgiveness is not about denying that harm was done, not about pretending that there was no hurt, not forgetting about the hostilities of the past. Indeed it may require naming and confronting evil. But *forgiveness is a decision* not to allow the past to stand in the way of a better future.

And that future must include healing for those who have been injured, and restoration, and reconciliation. In short, all those things that Christians believe flow from the Cross of Christ, from the place of redemptive suffering, from the place where the evil of the world was focused and absorbed within the Godhead; the place where grace and forgiveness and victory over evil flowed out in return. As Christian leaders we better know that restoration deep down, and teach it often, or we will never be able to assist in healing broken people and broken families and broken communities. And Christian communities - churches - better be modeling reconciliation!

Until the Christian ethic of non-retaliation is deeply embedded in us, and in the parts of the culture we have access to and influence over, we shall never break the chain of violence. Grace trumps retribution. Forgiveness disarms enemies. Is it hard? O, yes! But it is the way of God.

Let us pray...