Praying for enemies

What is the invitation to pray for enemies doing in the midst of a set of resources for conversations about sexuality? It’s here because divisive and difficult issues tend to call forth our enemy-making default habits. And nothing keeps things divisive and difficult like approaching them from an enemy-making mindset.

To my mind, loving and praying for our enemies involves three simple (but difficult) steps:

- admitting we have enemies
- asking God to help us want to love our enemies
- praying for our enemies.

Admitting we have enemies
The initial challenge in loving enemies is admitting that we have them. In my years as a pastor and a spiritual director, I’ve yet to meet anyone who said they had even one enemy. I found this surprising, since I think I’m an adequate Christian, yet find that I’m an equal-opportunity enemy-maker. My enemies have, at various points, included my parents, my siblings, my spouse, my children, my friends, and my colleagues. They have also included people who disagree with me or whose opinions and actions threaten (or seem to threaten) what I hold most dear.

A dramatic definition of “enemy” conveniently limits our enemies to those on the opposite side of a battlefield. We tend to think that Jesus’ command to love enemies is for someone else. If, instead, we recognize that our enemies are not only those who want to kill us but also anyone who’s “other,” and whose otherness feels like a threat to us or what we hold dear, we’re getting closer to what Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount. Almost every day delivers the possibility of one adversary or opponent, and thus the opportunity to love and pray for an enemy. I can’t help thinking this is a little over-generous of God, but what can you say. Generosity, in this respect as in others, seems to be a hallmark of God’s character and action.

So, to begin this journey of enemy love, as we go through our day, we ask God to make us aware of our enemies. That’s it.

Asking God to convert us
OK, so we’ve been noticing that we have enemies. Now what?

While I suppose it’s possible to make ourselves love our enemies, inherent in making ourselves do something can be the kind of inner violence that got us into the enemy-making business in the first place. Giving up over-against-ness (including over-against-ness with ourselves) is part of what’s involved in becoming useable for God, or, as one writer puts it, become willing rather than will-full.

So our next move is simply to ask God to give us the desire to love and pray for one or two of our enemies, whom we name specifically (see “Admitting we have enemies” above). It may be useful to pick an “easy” enemy (someone we also love, like a family member or a friend) as well as a “difficult” enemy (someone we would prefer never to have to run into).

It may take a while for us to receive the gift of desiring to love enemies. In the meantime, we’re wise to avoid judging ourselves for our lack of success in this practice. Instead, we trust the patient ferment of the Holy Spirit who is working to convert us even when we’re not aware.

Of course praying for the desire to love our enemies will mean releasing our enemy-making attitudes and behaviors when we notice them. I find it’s helpful to imagine these things as something I’m holding in my hand. I open my hand and hand them over to God. If I need to hand things over more than once, no problem: more chances to practice, more chances to learn enemy loving habits.
Praying for enemies
When God has given us the glimmer of the desire to pray for enemies, we start praying. This praying takes two forms:
• thanking God for our enemies
• praying for our enemies’ wholeness and flourishing.
Yes, that’s exactly what I meant to say. We thank God for our enemies and we pray for their well-being.

We thank God for our enemies because they help us see our own brokenness and need like little else. An enemy is an enemy precisely because he or she shines a light on something in our own lives that is hard to acknowledge or that desperately needs healing and transformation: hatred, fear, the need to be right, or the inability to trust God for the outcome, to name just a few possibilities. Even though the awareness our enemies offer us is not pleasant to receive, it is a huge gift. And the appropriate response to a gift is thank you.

And we pray for the flourishing of our enemies because we recognize that they, like we, desperately need what God alone can give. So we turn them over to God’s loving care for God to love as God loves—that is, more generously, more patiently, more mercifully than we do.

While some of this praying can happen individually, praying for enemies, like other Christian practices, benefits from company. Perhaps we will seek out a prayer partner, or perhaps a larger group of some kind—maybe, even, a group gathered specifically to help us pray for our enemies! An “enemy-love support group” would be an ideal place to confess our enmities, to encourage each other in the hard work of enemy-love, and to uphold each other in praying for enemies in gratitude and intercession.

I would also invite us to pray for our enemies in family and other intergenerational settings, including corporate worship. In public settings, it will be appropriate to pray more generally and/or to leave spaces for silent prayer than in more intimate settings. Yet loving enemies is so central to Jesus’ call to reconciliation that we can’t afford to give ourselves, our children, or our congregations the impression that it’s peripheral or occasional. Public prayers for enemies are an absolute necessity for all of us to grow up in faith.

Rachel Miller Jacobs, DMin, Assistant Professor of Congregational Formation, AMBS