

I just heard you all say some truly horrible things.

You asked God to fight those who fight you, to attack those who are attacking you. You asked God to shame and humble them, so that they could be blown away by the wind, down a dark and slippery way.

You said that when their fall is complete you would be joyful in the Lord and would glory in his victory.

All that you said when you read Psalm 35, right here in front of God and everybody else. I am surprised at you, inviting God to fight and to punish your enemies, right before you heard Jesus invite you to love them.

One of the things that prevents true repentance is an overly high sense of ourselves. That's why I wanted to read that Psalm together.

We know ourselves to be sinners, but I think we think that on a pretty abstract level.

We are more deeply in touch with our self-justification.

We are good church members; we are civic-minded people.

We are loving spouses and siblings and children.

Our aspirations, who we want to be, our better selves, come quickly to mind.

We have trouble thinking of ourselves as someone who has enemies, who has earned enemies.

I would hesitate to call the people who make me maddest in my life my enemies; I would hope they would not think of me as their enemy.

We are not like that, we think. We are just too nice or too respectable to have enemies.

And yet we so.

What is a person I avoid, whose well-being does not concern me, who I would not mourn, if not my enemy?

And what am I to them?

It is good for us to recite such words and to remember that we have indeed been victims of others' unrighteousness and have inflicted it on others as well.

From ancient times, the Psalms, which are full of talk about enemies, have demanded we ponder who our enemies are.

In addition to your least favorite sibling, the politician you detest, and ISIS, spiritual teachers have suggested that we look within when we seek to know our enemies.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy, we often say.

We are capable of grandly self-defeating behavior, to be sure.

And our anger and pride, sometimes lodged so deep within us; these can utterly defeat us before anyone else has the chance.

We need not scan the horizon to find all our enemies; sometimes we need to close our eyes and dwell in the Spirit and fight them there.

Indeed, it might be a great step forward in the Christian life to admit that we have enemies and are other people's enemies.

That we are our own enemy and have enemies lodged in our being.

Until we admit it, until we name it, our spiritual opportunity is limited.

We retreat all too readily to niceness and to respectability; to the bottling up of our feelings, grievances, and the wrongs we have done.

But if we admit the reality of enemies, within and without,

then we have a chance to live into the Lord's command to love our enemies, one of the greatest spiritual adventures we might have.

As Jesus vanquished the enemies of sin and death through the abundant love of the cross, we defeat our enemies by the love to which he commands us.

God and you can love the anger and pride of your human heart into a gentle submission.

You and God can also love yourself into a new creation, if you are your own worst enemy.

You can love your former business partner, ex-husband or wife, or detested public figure into some different shape, if not their own being, at least in their form to you.

You may have to admit that you hate them, before you can love them.

You may have to let yourself pray against them, before you can pray for them.

Admitting that you share in the general broken spiritual condition of humanity, however, give you the chance to be raised to the newness of life and the restored relationship that are freely given in Jesus Christ.