

Violence in the name of love (Matthew 22:34-46; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8)

## **How, in real life, do we love God and neighbor?**

by [Carter Heyward](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

Jesus is clear that the greatest commandment is to love God and that a second commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. The commandment to love is the basis of all the world's major religions. Few Christians would argue that anything is more important to God.

For some, loving God requires that we follow religious law as it's been passed down and interpreted over the years for what's been deemed the good order of the community: male headship of family and church; marriage as possible only between men and women; unquestioning obedience to parents, even when parents are abusive or wrong. Many Christians believe that these laws are steeped in the commandment to love God and neighbor.

The worldwide gathering of Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference this past summer testifies to the fact that most Anglicans throughout the world believe that homosexuality is a grave sin against God and neighbor. Many believe that even to tolerate homosexuality is to sin against God and neighbor and to place oneself outside the boundaries of Christian community. Making their case for the exclusion of gay people, some African Anglican leaders, egged on by U.S. traditionalists, contend that leaders of Islam in their nations consider homosexuality to be evil.

The conflict illustrates how a shared desire to love God and neighbor can propel people along radically divergent spiritual and political courses. All too often the commandment to love becomes a rationale for violence waged against those whom we perceive to be the enemies of God and of all that is good.

The love of God and neighbor must never be a basis upon which we seek to destroy our sisters and brothers. This is a spiritually complex, challenging matter. Case in point: I am outraged when I see images of young Afghan girls burning themselves to death because the Taliban have accused them of Shari'a violations or because their own families are shaming them. Yes, perhaps I react as a cultural imperialist, a

Western feminist critic of another's way of life. But my rage and critique are steeped in my understanding that the love of God and neighbor is not being extended to Afghanistan's women and girls, and that, in this context, the Taliban are sinning against God and doing great evil in the name of Allah.

Yes, we must fight the Taliban: this is a collective moral as well as political responsibility that we must undertake on behalf of Afghanistan's people, especially its women. But wait. Are we using the love of God and neighbor to justify our efforts to destroy these Taliban leaders? Aren't we, like the Taliban, like al-Qaeda, like Bush and Cheney, like religious, political and military leaders from time immemorial, declaring that God is on our side and that whatever killing we do is justified by our love of God and neighbor? What then distinguishes us from the Taliban, from Osama bin Laden or any political leader who dares to assume that God is on his or her side?

I believe that what distinguishes those who claim to be lovers of God and neighbor is not simply the claim to love God and neighbor but how they practice this love. How, in real life, do we love? How, in the middle of a war, can we love our enemies? How do we illuminate the love of God and neighbor as a way of life?

An oft-cited prophetic passage, Micah 6:8, tells us exactly how to love: struggle for justice; show mercy, kindness; walk humbly with God. Justice-making constitutes the how of God's love whether we experience it between intimate lovers and friends or between ourselves and our enemies in contexts of conflict, including war. God's wisdom, Sophia, opens us to the possibilities of living in this Spirit and realizing the possibilities for good and evil in all of us. But can we incarnate these spiritual gifts into our daily lives?

We can, although only partially. Loving perfectly is not within the realm of human possibility. But we can be lovers of God and even of our enemies if we can loosen the grip of fear and its pathetic spawn, the demonization of enemies as unworthy of God's love. The simple recognition of our enemy's humanity, however distorted by violence it may have become, may crack open a door through which we can imagine meeting the enemy as a brother or sister.

The dreadful history of wars holds stories of mercy and humility, and of those who recognize the humanity of the enemy. Film director Clint Eastwood told a story, imagined through the eyes of a Japanese commander, about one of the classic battles of World War II. In *Letters from Iwo Jima*, Eastwood portrays both terrible evil and also amazing goodness demonstrated by both Japanese and U.S. soldiers. He

presents images of kindness extended by each side's soldiers to their enemies as well as images of unspeakable horror. The layers of moral complexity portrayed through this film suggest that it was inspired by God's wisdom and love.