

Loving my neighbor, but only for 40 days in Lent

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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Loving the people I don't like. That was my Lenten discipline last year, and it is again. I've not made much progress in the last 12 months. It started with some prayerful reflection on what it means to love God and neighbor as the most important part of fulfilling the deepest intention of the law. Neighbors are not always easy to love, especially if you don't like them. The generalized Christian claim that "I love everybody" just doesn't cut it. It's easy enough to love the people I like. Anybody can do that, says St. Paul. So my original idea was to learn to love the people I don't like who inhabit various parts of my life. It's more complicated than I expected.

It turns out that disliking someone is a variable that ranges from "I can tolerate you except for these two or three things you do/are that really get under my skin" to "What you say and do borders on the despicable and I really don't like you at all." None of the people within that range are enemies as such. I'm not trying to learn to love my enemies. I'm just trying to learn to love the people I don't like, and it's hard. Some I've learned to tolerate in reasonably good humor. Some I prefer to avoid except when socially or professionally required. Some I keep emotionally and physically as far away from me as possible. Oddly enough, it seems these are the very people Jesus would have me learn to love.

Continuing prayerful reflection on this problem, I had to face the unpleasant fact that many of them don't like me either, and I find that very hard to believe. Me? A gentle priest of the church? How could that be? How do you bridge the gap of mutual dislike?

It also brings into question the meaning of what it is to love. I know all the Greek words for it. I've read Lewis's *The Four Loves*. I can recall a bit of Plato, though not much. As a practical matter, they don't help. Love has become a catchall that hovers somewhere between erotic passion and tepid, unfocused affection. The love of God as revealed in Christ Jesus seems to embrace all of that and so much more that I have no words of understanding to give it.

You can see how this gets complicated, and why it continues to be my Lenten discipline. If it would just hold still for a while, maybe I could get a grip on it. But we have added a new dimension popularly known as the polarization of society. Extremist camps throughout the world, every part of our own nation, and my own community have made it very difficult not to affiliate with at least one of them. The guiding principle of each is that any deviation whatsoever from their adopted ideology is not to be tolerated. The only goal of each is to obliterate all others by whatever means necessary. It makes conversation very difficult, and if we can't have conversation, how can we learn to love each other in spite of not liking each other very much?

And so here I am at the start of Lent once more. Once more I will take up the 40-day challenge to be intentional and diligent about learning to love the people I don't like. I think I will work on two dimensions. One, letting the light of Christ shine through me into the lives of those I don't like. In other words, getting out of God's way and letting God do what I can't. Second, doing what I can to allow Christ's light to flow into my life from people I don't like. That could be very hard for me. We shall see.

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