

Leap of love: Kierkegaard on regard for enemies

There are serious obstacles to making the spiritual adjustment required to presuppose love.

July 17, 2002

Scholars can be like children in a schoolyard. We push one another around, turn our noses up and have our cliques. On the terrain that I know best, the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, today's Gettysburg is the struggle between readers who see play and misdirection everywhere in Kierkegaard and those who are inclined to read him as a philosophically and poetically gifted evangelist. Still, here and there in Kierkegaard's books there are passages that calm our squabbles and remind us why we began reading him in the first place.

A few weeks ago, I stumbled across one such text. In the first part of *Works of Love* Kierkegaard reflects: "But what, then, is love? Love is to presuppose love; to have love is to presuppose love in others; to be loving is to presuppose that others are loving." The suggestion that the labor of love begins with trusting that love is in the heart of the other struck me both as right and as a judgment. I sometimes judge people as too narcissistic to care about anyone but themselves. Once I have made that judgment, I just try to keep the peace and do not expect much from them. On Kierkegaard's reckoning, this judgment and the attitudes that accompany it are anathema to love. The Gospels warn us of how difficult it is to have faith in the unseen, especially when we are faced with a neighbor who, for one reason or another, earns our ire.

The night after reading Kierkegaard's injunction to presuppose love, I walked down a figurative block and knocked on the doors of all the people who have ever hurt me. This one left me in the lurch, that one deceived me, that one ruined an important job prospect and, worst of all, that one emotionally scarred one of my children. In each case, I puzzled over how I could possibly presuppose the love, which is to say the basic goodness, of people I have reason to hate.

Kierkegaard counsels that I can love those who have wronged me because that is precisely what Jesus commands me to do. Loving my enemies is not an option but a requirement.

There are serious obstacles to making the spiritual adjustment required to presuppose love. As that pastor of postmodernity, Nietzsche, taught us, we have strong tendencies to nurse our rage and resentments. Some simply enjoy the release of aggression that comes with seething, but we are bound to our anger in other, more complicated ways as well. Our antagonists become important characters in the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves on both a global and personal level. Still, Christ commands us to love our enemies, which is to say, to let go of our furies. But how?

When a friend hurts you, love recommends that you look for a mitigating circumstance. And if I am serious about following Christ, then I should use the meliorating strategies that I use with beloved friends also with those who cause my stomach to knot. When I remember the people who tripped me on the way to one or another blackboard, Christian love commands me to ask myself, "What was my brother or sister so angry or numb about? What wounds rendered him incapable of acting lovingly?" Asking such questions is not a strategy for forgiving deeds that have not been repented for, but rather for helping me to remove the stumbling blocks preventing me from trusting the basic goodness of others.

The events of September 11 present a formidable challenge to Kierkegaard's insistent claim that there is no loving without presupposing love. Though it hardly seems like it, we are at war, and many Americans who otherwise understand themselves to be under Jesus' peculiar orders to love their enemies seem to believe that once the shooting starts those orders are suspended. It is a truism to say that when you are going to kill your enemies it is best to kill them twice: take their human features away first by calling them gooks or demons and then drop the bunker busters.

But those who do not think that Jesus was exaggerating when he commanded universal love still need to ask, "How can we love the people who brought the cargo of death to New York and Washington?" Or, as Kierkegaard would press, "How can we presuppose the love of people who hated us so much that they were willing to immolate themselves in order to deliver a blow against the U.S.?" Though some Christians will fume at the idea, Christian love requires that we ask what caused this

boundless rage in children of God. Do the terrorists believe that we are glibly destroying their prospects for life? Do they believe that for all our palaver about God, the only thing that we hold sacred are our so-called strategic interests? If so, is there anything that we can do to address the sources of their pain and rage?

In theory at least, such counsel need not involve going that extra ten miles and turning the other cheek. In theory, we could presuppose love without refraining from retaliation. After all, a sympathetic understanding of the motives of a killer does not prohibit us from defending ourselves against that killer, with deadly force if necessary. For example, the fact that I understand that someone attacking me mistakenly believes that I am the devil does not require that I passively let that person annihilate me.

But perhaps this line of reasoning which permits me to believe that I can love the enemy and yet intend to kill him is not the voice of love, but rather the kind of self-serving sophistry for which the people we are bombing today despise us. I am not sure. But I do know that Kierkegaard is right to remind us—yes, even after 9/11—that to love is to presuppose love.