

WHEN ENEMIES BECOME FRIENDS Isaiah 11:1-10

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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There are many current issues in our country that divide Americans into enemies--- issues such as abortion, capital punishment, gun control, gay marriage, the war in Iraq, immigration, red states vs. blue states. There are also several major issues in our denomination on which people have taken sides as enemies, particularly the question of whether self-acknowledged, practicing gays and lesbians should be ordained as ministers, elders, and deacons. Sometimes, even in our own families, we seem to be at war--- parents vs. children, husbands vs. wives, siblings vs. siblings.

Conflict between individuals and between groups of people seems to be so much a part of our human experience that we have come to accept conflict and confrontation as normal and normative. It never seems to occur to us to question whether there might be a better way to live, or whether perhaps God intended a different way for us to live together on this planet that God created as our home.

The scripture that we read from Isaiah presents an alternative way of life, not just for human beings, but for all of God's creation. Isaiah envisions a time when our perception of what is natural and normal will be seen as unnatural and abnormal, when those that we regard as natural enemies will in fact become friends: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear, the child and the snake.

Unbelievable? Unimaginable? Perhaps, if our imagination is limited to the world as we know it. But Isaiah is imaging a different kind of reality. Isaiah's image is of a new day in which the bear will no longer feed on the cow but rather with the cow. The wolf will live in the barn alongside the lamb, and the lion and the ox will dine together on straw. The child's playmates will be poisonous snakes. And they will not hurt each other. These things will be normal and natural in this new day that God is bringing.

As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out in his book *Living Toward a Vision*, the effect of Isaiah's vision "is to expose the real abnormalities of life, which we have taken for granted. We have lived with things abnormal so long that we have gotten used to them and we think they are normal" (United Church Press, 1976, p. 45). We assume that the powerful will devour the weak, and the large will conquer the small. But God, through the prophet Isaiah, challenges us to image a radically different world, a world of shalom, of peace and harmony, in which so-called natural enemies become friends.

Now in this new world, when enemies become friends, it does not mean that the differences between them are eliminated. The bear is still a bear, and the cow is still a cow. They may still disagree on what constitutes the best menu for dinner, but the bear has agreed not to have roast cow any more.

Parents are still parents, and teenagers are still teenagers, and they may still disagree on what constitutes acceptable dress, but they have agreed to love and respect each other anyway.

Men are still men, and women are still women, and they may disagree on how to relate to each other, but they have agreed not to demean each other with sexual harassment and innuendos and sexist jokes.

Gays are still homosexual, and straights are still heterosexual, and they may disagree on how our sexual identity is determined, but they have agreed not to treat each other with contempt.

When enemies become friends, the differences do not go away; they are just accepted. The former enemies agree to live together in unity in spite of their diversity. Isaiah's vision challenges all of us to image a new world in which diverse peoples can live together in harmony.

But just picturing a new world in our minds doesn't really do anything to help bring it about, does it? Well, perhaps it does. The book of Proverbs tells us that "where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 11:14, KJV). Similarly, psychologists who deal in behavior modification encourage their clients to image the new and desired behavior as a first step to changing the old behavior.

So, for example, if I wanted to lose weight through the principle of behavior modification, I would first picture myself as being thinner and able to wear clothes two sizes smaller than I currently wear. I would then image myself at all the Christmas parties, walking right past all the delicious cookies and taking only the fresh fruit and vegetables. By both imaging the desired result and one way to achieve that result, I would be able to modify my current behavior.

Imaging a new world of shalom, or in the words of Walter Brueggemann, "living toward a vision," is the crucial first step toward making that vision of shalom a reality. Can we image a world where enemies become friends?---Israelis and Palestinians, blacks and whites, rich and poor, parents and teenagers, anti-abortion protesters and pro-choice advocates, gays and straights, Democrats and Republicans?

To the extent that we can image that new world, when enemies become friends, we have already taken an important step toward realizing that vision. If we can then go on and image one thing that we can do to help bring about that vision, then imaging that one thing and acting upon it will bring us one step closer to our goal.

Now a world in which enemies become friends is not as far-fetched as it might sound. In fact, changes like that have already happened in our own lifetime. For example, in the 1950s and '60s, many white people considered black people to be their enemies, and vice versa; and the threatened whites waged war against the blacks in Selma, Alabama, and Jackson, Mississippi.

But Martin Luther King had a dream, a dream of a day when black children and white children would sit at adjoining desks in schoolrooms all across the country, and when black families and white families would be next-door neighbors in suburbia and in small-town America. Because Martin Luther King had a dream and did what he could to bring that dream to reality, our society today, especially in the South, is much different from the segregated society in which I grew up. There is still much to be done, but enemies in many places have become friends.

On the international scene, our former arch-enemies, the Russians, are now our friends with whom we share the space station. Amazing, isn't it? Enemies have become friends.

Isaiah's vision of shalom, which is a radical departure from our ordinary way of looking at things, teaches us that God intends for all of God's creation to live together in peace and non-violence and harmony. In God's kingdom there are no enemies, only friends.

Isaiah's vision of a world at peace, however, will not come about until we see things from God's perspective. Isaiah's vision depends upon the earth being full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. In other words, only when God's way is known and trusted and followed all over the world will all people be able to live together as friends.

The good news is that God is bringing that kingdom of shalom into being, and that good news gives us hope, even in the midst of despair. We can help bring in that kingdom by taking Isaiah's vision seriously and living toward that vision.

As we walk in the light toward Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, let us do whatever we can in our own lives and our families, in our church and our denomination, in our country and our world, to enable enemies to become friends.

Let us pray. O Spirit of God, great Spirit of peace, pour out upon your sons and daughters your visions and dreams of peace. Give us hope and confidence, knowing that you are our strength, and that you go before us to show us the way. We pray in the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

