

Why Can't We Just Get Along?"  
Rev. Steven M. Conger  
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(Esther 4:14 NRSV) For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

How many of you are familiar with the story of the book of Esther?

Drama, power, romance, intrigue—this is the stuff of which best-selling novels are made. But far from a modern piece of fiction, those words describe the story, found in the book of Esther.

The book of Esther begins with Queen Vashti refusing to obey an order from her husband, King Xerxes. She was subsequently banished, and the search began for a new queen. The king sent out a decree to gather together all the beautiful women in the empire and bring them into the royal harem. Esther, a young Jewish woman, was one of those chosen to be in the royal harem. King Xerxes was so pleased with Esther that he made her his queen.

Meanwhile, Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, became a government official and during his tenure foiled an assassination plot. But the ambitious and self-serving Haman was appointed second-in-command in the empire. When Mordecai refused to bow in reverence to him, Haman became furious and was determined to destroy Mordecai and all the Jews along with him.

To accomplish his vengeful deed, Haman deceived the king and persuaded him to issue an edict condemning the Jews to death.

Mordecai told Queen Esther about this edict, and she decided to risk her life to save her people. Esther asked King Xerxes and Haman to be her guests at a banquet. During the feast, the king asked Esther what she really wanted, and he promised to give her anything. Esther simply invited both men to another banquet the next day.

That night, unable to sleep, the king was flipping through some records in the royal archives when he read of the assassination plot that Mordecai thwarted. Surprised to learn that Mordecai had never been rewarded for this deed, the king asked Haman what should be done to properly thank a hero. Haman thought the king must be talking about him, and so he described a lavish reward. The king agreed, but to Haman's shock and utter humiliation, he learned that Mordecai was the person to be so honored.

During the second banquet, the king again asked Esther what she desired. She replied that someone had plotted to destroy her and her people, and she named Haman as the culprit. Immediately the king sentenced Haman to die on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai.

In the final act of this drama, Mordecai was appointed to Haman's position, and the Jews were guaranteed protection throughout the land.

To celebrate this historic occasion, the Festival of Purim was established.  
I have been blessed to be in Israel during this celebration.

Because of Queen Esther's courageous act, a whole nation was saved.

**And everybody lived happily ever after.**

If only it was that easy to defeat prejudice and evil. Unfortunately there are names that have been written onto our memories in the last 70 years —

Auschwitz  
Buchenwald  
Dachau  
Treblinka

Bosnia  
Rwanda  
Sudan  
Darfur  
Syria  
Iraq

Names that remind us that humans are the most violent and hate filled of all the animals that live on this earth

Let me throw out some other names at you

Grand Theft Auto  
Super Smash Brothers  
MLB The Show 2017

Do these titles mean a thing to you?

How about  
NBA 2K17  
Call of Duty  
The Legend of Zelda  
Halo  
Guardians of the Galaxy  
Resident Evil

These are all video games - best-selling video games.

Part of an industry that rakes in over \$100 billion worldwide, and over \$23 billion a year in just the United States. This is big business.

Unfortunately, the industry is now being infiltrated by people who love to hate. Some lesser known titles hitting screens across the country are:

Ethnic Cleansing  
Border Patrol  
Shoot the Blacks  
Concentration Camp Rat Hunt.

The objectives of these sick games are predictably similar - to kill as many non-whites, Jews and other minority groups as possible.

Can't We Just Get Along?  
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According to the Anti-Defamation League, hate groups are increasingly using racist and anti-Semitic computer games to recruit young people.

These so-called "white-power games," which can be bought or downloaded online, use modern technology to seduce young game-players into bigotry, prejudice and anti-Semitism.

One of these games, Ethnic Cleansing, is being promoted as "the most politically incorrect video game ever made."

It takes place in an urban setting where the protagonist kills blacks and Latinos on city streets before descending into a subway to slay Jews. Racist rock music, with hate-filled lyrics, blares on the soundtrack, and National Alliance posters are plastered on the games virtual walls.

Any guess as to when this game was first released?  
January 21. Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

This is hatred pure and simple

There is no room for games like these among players who call themselves followers of the way of Jesus.

When Jesus found himself in the middle of a heated controversy in first-century Jerusalem, he offered a stunningly simple response to a very tricky question, an absolutely brilliant answer that served to silence a group of people who were trying to play games with him.

"Which commandment in the law," asked a theologically sophisticated lawyer, "is the greatest?"

Jesus knew that the religious leaders had counted no fewer than 613 commands in the law of God - 248 positive commands, linked to the number of parts of the body, and 365 negative commands, corresponding to the days of the year.

Which single commandment could possibly be the greatest?

Jesus also understood that he would be stepping on a theological land mine if he elevated one commandment above another, or if he declared that one category, such as "moral law," was more important than another category, such as "ceremonial law."

So what did Jesus say?

"Love."

Stunningly simple.

Absolutely brilliant.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," he reminded them, quoting a line from Deuteronomy. "This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40).

Love is the key for Jesus. It's the key for interpreting everything that God has revealed to us, not only in the law, but in the prophets. Instead of hatred, Jesus offers us love.

Shimon Peres was Israel's Prime Minister from 1984 to 1986, and in 1995 he assumed the role of acting prime minister of Israel following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. When Larry King interviewed him for his book *Powerful Prayers*, King asked him if he had a particular prayer that he prayed.

Peres replied that he always prayed for peace, because the failure to find peace had resulted in the deaths of so many people. He went on to agree that even Yasser Arafat prays to the same God, and that they claim the same father, Abraham.

Larry King then said that he was asking people to contribute a prayer for the book he was writing. He asked Peres if he had a contribution.

Peres replied: "I would offer the one sentence Moses told the people and is the basis of Judaism: Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Why is it so hard to love our neighbors as ourselves?  
Why can't we get along?

The problem with love is that it's a tough game to master, much more difficult than the newest Legend of Zelda game.

Hatred comes easily to us - it's almost a reflex action.  
Hatred between Israelis and Palestinians? No problem.

- Between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland? Simple.
- Between Neo-Nazis and minority groups? Natural.
- Between Americans and ISIS or al-Qaeda? That's a no-brainer. Bring on the smart bombs.

Hatred is easy, but simple love is an enormous challenge.

What makes it even trickier is that Jesus commands us to love not only our neighbors, but also our enemies.

"You have heard that it was said," says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45).

Think about it.

If you love those who love you, what's the big deal?

Don't even members of hate groups do the same?

A Neo-Nazi can sit around playing Ethnic Cleansing all day, blowing away legions of virtual minorities, and then go give his dear, sweet mother a big, affectionate kiss.

What makes the followers of Jesus distinctive is that they love not only their friends but also their enemies, and they pray precisely for those who persecute them.

The most powerful pictures to come out of Charlottesville, to me was of the clergy who stood arm in arm --- singing and praying together.

I wish I had the courage to do that.  
It's hard to imagine anything tougher.

Why is this?  
Why does hatred come so easily, and love remains so elusive?

We don't know quite how to move from being haters to being lovers.

Certainly most of us - probably all of us - are going to refuse to allow bigoted, violence-filled video games into our homes.

They are offensive, outrageously offensive.  
But even though we recoil at the thought of blowing people away, we are still a long way from loving them.

There are just so many barriers to the kind of love that Jesus commands us to practice.

- Self-interest keeps us from loving others, because we fear that another person's advantage will create a disadvantage for ourselves.
- Inconvenience prevents us from reaching out, because we are so resistant to leaving our own cultural, political, racial and political comfort zones.
- Distrust is a big barrier as well - we fear that if we lower our defenses, we'll be attacked.

On top of this, we are often held back by our fundamental dislike of certain people, by our disapproval of their hairstyles, clothes, music, food, work habits, attitudes and accents.

We have a misguided sense that religious purity would be threatened if we loved those who don't love us.

Another barrier is a simple lack of personal interest - many of us simply couldn't care less about people across the street, or around the world.

Another obstacle to love of neighbor is fear: We fear that we will be rejected, that we will offend, that we will be imposed upon, that we will be endlessly obligated.

Left to our own personal preferences, it is simply easier not to leap these barriers and obey the love commandment.

The good news for us is that Jesus never leaves us alone.

Jesus makes it very clear that the command to love God - which is really quite easy and natural for us to do - can never be separated from the much tougher command to love our neighbors.

We cannot first love God, and then, when we get really good at loving, take on the challenge of loving people around us.

To love God is identical to loving one's neighbor - they are as inseparable as the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross.

"On these two commandments," says Jesus, "hang all the law and the prophets."

This unity is what makes love of neighbor possible, because it links our human relationships to our relationship with God.

Loving others is not just a nice and noble and enlightened thing to do, but it is, instead, an integral part of our spiritual growth, a component of our relationship with Christ, and an aspect of our everlasting salvation.

When we love a neighbor, we not only fulfill the great commandment but we act as a channel for God, we experience a truly indescribable joy, and we discover the very meaning of human existence.

Best of all, we confront our Lord Jesus in a powerful, profound and personal way.

Jesus promises to meet us, after all, in one particular place:  
in our needy neighbors.

At the last judgment, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the nations will be gathered before him, and all the people of the world will be divided into sheep and goats. The good sheep will be invited into the kingdom of God for one reason, and one reason only, predicts Jesus:

They were the ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick and visited the prisoner.

And, most amazing of all, when the good sheep served their neighbors, they were really - surprise, surprise - serving Jesus himself.

- When they fed a homeless woman, they were feeding Jesus.
- When they gave a cup of water to an immigrant groundskeeper, they were refreshing Jesus.
- When they welcomed a stranger of a different race to worship, they were welcoming Jesus.
- When they purchased clothes for poor children, they were clothing Jesus.
- When they cared for an AIDS patient, they were caring for Jesus.
- When they visited inmates in the county jail, they were visiting Jesus.

To love one's neighbor is to love Jesus Christ.

Nothing more, nothing less.

They are exactly the same.

Martin Luther King in one of his sermons tells this story:

Napoleon, as he came toward the end of his career, looked back across the years ---  
at a very early age he had all but conquered the world.

He was not stopped until he moved out to the battle of Leipzig and then to  
Waterloo.

As he reflected on his life he said:

"Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended upon force. But long ago Jesus started an empire that depended on love, and even to this day millions will die for him."