“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.”

Friends, I’ve written three sermons on this text in the last two weeks. We know what it is to do good. We know what it is to lend. I have a lot to say about both those topics! But this “love your enemies” bit keeps tripping me up. Because what is an enemy in our modern daily lives? The definitions must vary greatly. I think a soldier has a much clearer idea than I do, but I can’t speak for her experience. People who have the lived trauma of brutality at the hands of another have a different idea of enemy, too. But I suspect in the boring, day to day world, our enemies look a little different. I wonder if we even recognize them.

Webster tells us an enemy is someone we feel adversarial toward. Well, if that’s the definition, my experience tells me my sisters have been my enemies almost as often as they’ve been my friends.

If we look at American society as a whole right now, we have this new term, maybe you’ve heard it before: frenemy. A frenemy is someone you have to get along with because of work or school and maybe you even enjoy them sometimes, but ultimately, you’re not supportive of each other and you may even sabotage each other if the opportunity arises. Know anyone like this? Although the word has been around since the fifties, frenemy was popularized by the 2004 hit movie, Mean Girls. Mean Girls is exactly what it sounds like—teenaged girls vying for power and social dominance in high school. In it, new girl Cady is caught between two friend groups, one nerdy and one popular. She endeavors to know both of them and is told that she simply can’t: it has to be one or the other. The lines have been drawn. What
these girls teach us is that every time we draw lines, the people on the other side of the line become *other*. Unrelatable. Unknowable. These groups of *others* transcend time and culture. In *Mean Girls* they’re called the Plastics. In the bible they’re called the Samaritans. I wonder who they are in our lives.

Having spent a few years living in Chicago, one thing I got really good at was not seeing people who are homeless. It’s an active decision. I was taught that they way to get through the city was to train my eyes to skim lightly over a crowd, not seeing what I didn’t want to see, not making eye contact. Their need was too great. I didn’t know if I should give them money. I didn’t want them to ask. I felt guilty for having so much. I wondered if I was safe with them. It felt safer to let myself think, “These people are too different, in too much need for me to be able to do anything,” and to keep on walking. I am not particularly proud of this.

But our teenagers taught me a better way. Over MLK weekend, our youth headed to Chicago for their first Urban Plunge, which is part of our *Journey to Adulthood* program. They were given $10 each and, just like the *Blues Brothers*, a mission from God: do good. They were instructed to further God’s kingdom not once, but twice: once using their cash, once without.

During a brief, but intense discussion—to which we chaperones were not invited--our teens debated hotly whether they should donate their cash to a program or give it to people they met. They ultimately decided that what would be most meaningful to them would be to give it directly to other people. And so their mission continued on the streets of Chicago. As we drove downtown, the energy in the car was excited, but nervous.

  How do we find people who need help?
  What if they need something we can’t give them?
What if we offend someone?
About half the car had become silent and the other half couldn’t seem to stop asking questions. Then we saw him. Or more specifically, I think Will Young saw him. “Hey, this guy looks like he could use help! Should we pull over?” The decision was unanimous.

The man’s name is Peter. Peter is white and he’s in his twenties. He was standing on the median in the middle of West Randolph, in an orange parka that wasn’t warm enough for the weather. Our youth would probably want you to know that Peter has a really cool beard. They piled out of the car and through a snow drift to get his attention. I stayed nearby to make sure they were safe, but let them do the talking. It went on so long that I became impatient in the cold. It was seven degrees out and I hadn’t expected them to stop for a chat! I don’t remember who handed him money or how much, but I do remember that Sam Dornback reached out his hand and shook it. The handshake turned into one of those manly, back-clapping hugs, and Peter beamed. Our youth beamed, too. When they piled back into the car, their energy was completely different.

“He hasn’t been able to hold down a job because he’s homeless, but he’s homeless because he can’t hold down a job. He has nowhere to wash his clothes.”

“Peter was a drug addict, which is how he became homeless, but he found a rehab program and got clean. He’s been clean for a few months, now.”

“Peter says drugs aren’t his problem, anymore, it’s that he doesn’t have any family. He has no one to rely on while he picks himself up from here.”
“He’s in his early twenties.”

“It seemed to matter to him that we stopped.”

“Peter said it made his day.”

“He wanted to know all about us, too.”

Peter was the first of about ten people in similar circumstances that our teenagers met that weekend and knowing him changed the way we saw everything. Watching them meet him changed the way _I_ saw everything. Because Peter—he is just a few years older than our kids. He is only a step removed from them. And he let us know him. Suddenly every single person on the streets of Chicago stood out. The crowds of people became individual faces. Knowable faces. They became peers, people with stories I wanted to know. Friends I wanted to make.

Because once we know someone, that opens the door to love. And really, that’s what we love about Jesus, isn’t it? That he knows us so well and loves us so completely. It’s a regular pattern in the gospels. In Luke, two chapters from now, we hear about a centurion—a slave-owning Roman officer with more worldly power than Jesus ever has—if anyone should be “other” to him, it’s this guy. But Jesus announces, “I haven’t found _anyone_ in Israel with as much faith as you.” And we all know the woman at the well. She says, “Jesus knows everything I ever did in my life.” Jesus sees a man in a tree and says, “Come on down, Zacchaeus. We’re going to your house.” And to Peter he proclaims, “You are the rock I’m building my church on. You are right person for this.” We love Jesus because when he looks at us, he _knows_
us and loves us. With Jesus, no lines are drawn. There is no other. There’s just us.

In the end, the youth may have given Peter some cash, but Peter gave us the gift of being able to see outside ourselves. To a person, when we discussed how our youth accomplished the goal of doing good without using money, our youth said it was being present, looking someone in the eye, and smiling. People reflected back to them that no one had stopped to talk with them for days. They appreciated the coffee, but they needed the human contact. The very act of meeting someone’s eyes erased the lines that we place around ourselves to make ourselves feel safe. Jesus calling us to love our enemies is an invitation to realize we don’t need to draw lines to protect us from our insecurities. The solider, the victim of violence: these people have enemies they are also being called to love and that work is long and hard. But frankly, although we may call them by other names like frenemy, Samaritans, or other, we all have enemies. For each of us, the work of our lifetimes is to erase the lines that separate us from the rest of the world, expecting nothing, but hoping to meet Christ. After all, as modern theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber said, “Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it.”