



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 2 (C)

Enemies

[RCL] Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

“For many lives as enemies of the cross of Christ.” In his letter to the Philippians, Paul explains that these enemies of the cross are focused on earthly things and pursuing a hedonistic existence here in this life. There is no scholarly consensus on who these enemies are, and Paul gives few hints as to their identity or their specific beliefs. Some biblical experts suggest they were Epicureans who followed an ethic of pleasure-seeking as the highest good. Other scholars suggest these enemies were cultic followers of the Roman emperor. Regardless, Paul has strong words for them, issuing the ominous warning, “Their end is destruction.”

Identifying enemies is one of the most difficult challenges in human life. As humans evolved, one of the skills that aided survival was recognizing potential threats and dangers. That evolutionary trait extended from individual self-preservation to community preservation. Knowing when something imperils a community is essential in maintaining group survival. For centuries, Christians have warded off those individuals, beliefs, or behaviors identified as enemies of proper belief or practice. But history has shown that the church has not always gotten things right. Whether it was witch trials, crusades, or justification for slavery, Christians have again and again missed the mark in correctly identifying enemies. The rush to declare war on a perceived enemy is not unique to Christianity. This enemy-friend distinction is not even unique to religion or only to human sociality. Environmental ecosystems are also sensitive to enemy outsiders. Many species of both plant and animal have come to be seen as pests, and some with good reason. Invasive species can disrupt the balance of an ecosystem and displace native species of flora and fauna.

One of those species deemed to be invasive and an enemy to a local ecosystem is the lyrebird. These birds, native to Australia, are known for the male bird’s large tail plumage and the ability to imitate almost any sound, including other birds, mammals, and even construction sites. After European arrival, there were fears that the species was under threat, and so eighty years ago, 22 birds were released on the island of Tasmania. It was thought they might be more protected from the foxes brought in by settlers. Today, scientists estimate almost 10,000 lyrebirds in Tasmania.

However, their adaptation into the Tasmania forests is not seen by everyone as a successful conservation story. The lyrebirds are among the most impressive ecosystem engineers, with the ability to move the most soil of any land-dwelling animal. While digging for bugs and food on the forest floor, a single bird can move the equivalent of eleven dump trucks of soil per year. Because of this incredible ability to affect their natural environment, some biologists and environmentalists have labeled the lyrebirds in Tasmania as feral pests. They reasoned that the movement of so much of the forest floor must be having a negative effect on the wider ecosystem.

But recent research has shed more light on the lyrebird's impact on the Tasmanian forest ecosystem. One researcher conducted two experiments to figure out exactly what effect the lyrebirds were having on their broader environment. She found that while there was initially a large impact on the soil and organisms in the areas dug up by the lyrebirds, after only three weeks, the forest recovered. Once the lyrebirds had moved on from an area, within two months, there was no evidence of significant impact on the biodiversity or soil in the area. The study showed that lyrebirds are not enemies of mature ecological systems. This story of the lyrebird connects in profound ways to the Scripture readings assigned for today. Both the lyrebird and the readings have important things to teach us about how we interact with those perceived as enemies.

The psalm for today, Psalm 27, is traditionally attributed to King David. The song begins with the lyrical exclamation, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?" For the psalmist, there are indeed real enemies around who are attempting harm and violence. And yet, David's first impulse is to look for God: "One thing have I asked of the Lord; one thing I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." For David, the most important thing is not the enemy nearby. It is not the threat of violence. It is seeking the face of God. Similarly, for Paul, the most important thing for the Philippians was not to know the ins and outs of the enemies' beliefs and practices; the important thing was to live out their identity as citizens of another kingdom. The enemies of the cross were tied to the immediate satisfaction of this life: "Their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is not saying that Christianity has nothing to do with this life and this world. But looking to God puts all things into perspective.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is faced with enemies. From the very beginning of his ministry, people wish him harm. In today's reading, some religious leaders warn him that he has made an enemy of Herod, the local ruler. Jesus responds by proclaiming what his ministry is about; it is not about toppling political regimes, but about proclaiming freedom and healing. Jesus reminds his followers that there is direction and purpose to his ministry, even when things are dark.

With the lyrebirds, it is easy to see how someone might come upon an area of the forest floor recently disturbed and conclude that these birds were of immediate and grave danger to the greater ecosystem. But for those researchers who stayed to observe the longer impacts, the longer-term perspective showed that

the destruction was only temporary. As Christians, seeking first God's kingdom and God's face puts everything else into perspective. In the last verse of the psalm, the author turns from his first-person perspective to an instruction for the listener: "O tarry and await the Lord's pleasure; be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; wait patiently for the Lord." Some of those things that we thought were enemies are revealed to be like lyrebirds—causing a ruckus and temporary upheaval, but in the deep ecological time of the mature forest, leaving no lasting damage.

There are enemies of the cross. There are enemies of mutual flourishing and of the ability to love our neighbors as ourselves. To continue the ecological metaphor, there are invasive species of plants and animals that can disrupt the balance of the ecosystem. But the Scripture passages from today teach us that sometimes, the best way to weather these attacks is not by attacking those perceived enemies in turn. Instead of focusing on those perceived as enemies around us, our focus ought to be fixed on God, who gives strength and resilience. The forest survives the lyrebirds simply by leaning into the rich biodiversity and maturity of its ecosystem. When we patiently wait for the Lord, turn to God, and remember that our primary citizenship is in heaven, there is nothing left to fear.

***Michael Toy** is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington studying digital religion in New Zealand. He also serves as public theologian for the Student Christian Movement Aotearoa.*