

No Enemies (Psalm 68.1-10, 32-35)
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He is, in a word, diminutive. He is not a big man but rather small and thin. He wears a basic robe of earthen brown. His head is shaved in the style of a monk, and his brow and cheeks are deeply wrinkled with age. He walks slowly, bows often, and sits quietly before the rooms full of students and searches that come to hear him. And when he speaks his voice is remarkably gentle, almost like a whisper only a little happier. Because he often smiles as he talks and teaches. And the students smile back and sometimes nod. What he says is so simple and so radical.

I cannot remember exactly when I was first introduced to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and peace activist. I only remember that from my very first engagement with him, I smiled, too. The teachings he offered were full of such compassion—for self and others—that they instantly reminded me of the teachings of a certain rabbi, though with a Zen twist. I heard in Nhat Hanh the great themes of mindful attention to the present moment, creating peace with every small step and choice, and beginning to see that the dualities and discriminations we create are illusory. He invited me to move from my liberal Christian perspective on being (see Paul Tillich) to an engaged Buddhist perspective on “interbeing.” None of us can “be” by ourselves alone, he taught; rather, we can only be in relation with other people and the world. There is no independent existence. All forms are contingent.

The ideas sound so basic and beautiful, but when Thich Nhat Hanh begins to carry them to their lived conclusions, they turn all of our assumptions on their heads. If everything is connected in a vast web of interbeing, then our work is to begin to glimpse

this whole, to see that our lives are not about ourselves alone or the categories we have created. In Nhat Hanh's own words:

People normally cut reality into compartments, and so are unable to see the interdependence of all phenomena. To see one in all and all in one is to break through the great barrier which narrows one's perception of reality...¹

While I have long believed that the monk had it right, it was he himself that convinced me of the beauty and power of what he was saying. This became apparent to me during the late summer of 2003 when I flew to Massachusetts to attend a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh and the monks and nuns of his Plum Village community. As a bit of background, I need to say that at that time our country had recently invaded Iraq in an aggressive act that many of us believed was illegal and immoral. Many in this congregation, including myself, and many around the country and the world had worked and demonstrated and resisted the war as our government pushed us strongly toward it. Lines had been drawn, sides had been taken, and political struggles and cultural conflicts had ensued. I had never experienced a period of such sustained upset in my own life, and by the time I arrived at the retreat I was aware that I had been angry for a couple of years. Like so many other peaceniks in attendance, I longed for a time to sit, meditate, be silent, and find nourishment for the work ahead. A few of Nhat Hanh's dharma talks were meant to address living mindfully during a time of war, and I was very interested to hear him speak about that (for those of you who may not know, Thich Nhat Hanh grew up in Vietnam during the American war and was exiled after visiting Paris as part of a Buddhist peace delegation). If anyone had credibility, surely it was this gentle monk who

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 48.

had lived through the horror of war and dedicated his life to working for peace.² And here's what he did that felt so revolutionary to me:

Thich Nhat Hanh started one of his talks very angrily. I had heard dozens of his talks and read most of his books, but I had never heard him sound so upset; equanimity was sort of his forte. But as he sat cross-legged at the front of the meditation hall, Nhat Hanh's voice rose more than usual and his words came out sharply. He deeply lamented our country's quick move to war, he publicly decried the suffering and death wrought by the falling bombs, and he questioned the soul of a culture that called itself Christian yet freely took up the sword in violation of the teachings of Jesus. (Thich Nhat Hanh is also a student of Jesus and a longtime friend of activist ministers like Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, and Daniel Berrigan.) As I listened to him speak, all of my own anger came rushing back, and with it an underlying sadness. Hot tears began to roll down my cheeks as the compassionate monk asked what we had done. And then he did a curious thing. He encouraged us to look more deeply into the situation in which we found ourselves.

The war was not out there somewhere, he whispered. The war was in each of us. Then he moved away from a discussion of the politics to a more personal discussion of the arguments we had all had, the shouting we had done, the angry calls to radio stations, and the bitter letters written to representatives. The fear, the anger, the hatred, the sadness, they are all inside us, he suggested. If we look deeply we can see that we are all the same. The peacenik who marches against the war is not really different than the president who launched it. To that end, he bid us all take out a piece of paper. Almost everyone had a notepad; those who didn't borrowed a sheet from their neighbors. And

² See *Peace is Every Step*, DVD, dir. Gaetano Kazuo Maida, (1997; Oakland: Festival Media, 2005).

the monk had us all write a letter to the president. This was not meant to be a protest letter, he said. It was to be a love letter. Sitting in the meditation hall, I stared at my blank tablet and tried very hard to write a love letter to the president with whom I was in deep disagreement. It took me a long time to get started, but I bore the monk's words in mind. Remember that he is as scared as you, he said. Remember that he is worried and perhaps confused. Remember that he is only a person. Remember that he has never seen a war and does not know what he has done. Write to him in kindness. Write to him in understanding. Write to him in brotherhood and ask him to wake up. More tears streamed down my cheeks, blotting my view of the page as I imagined, perhaps for the first time, that the president was not my enemy but my friend. For years I had been thinking otherwise.

This story was actually prompted by this week's lectionary psalm. When I read the psalm, I had a very strong and negative reaction to it. For it envisions, in a very ancient way, a dualistic universe where lines are drawn and sides are taken. In its very first verse, the psalm speaks of enemies and sings happily of their destruction; it continues by violently imagining others melting as wax before a God who "rides upon the clouds."³ At first, all I could see or hear in these lines were the things I resolutely do not believe in. I do not believe in a God that takes sides. I do not believe in forms of religion that sanction violence. I do not believe in the false divisions between "us" and "them," the "saved" and the "unsaved," the "righteous" and the "wicked." I believe rather like the monk that these categories are simply mental constructs, boxes into which the mind places things in a display of dangerous oversimplification. Yet, having said this, I am

³ Psalm 68.4a, New Revised Standard Version.

aware that this psalm and its judgmental metaphysics are part of my own cultural inheritance. And even as I seek to honor the relationships and resist the easy dualities, I am also a minister with a strongly judgmental side (all liberal ministers are). So I see shades of myself in the text. For all of the letters I had written to the president before that Buddhist retreat were as harsh or harsher than the words of the psalmist; they might have melted any reader like “wax before the fire.”⁴

The psalm continues with a slightly better sentiment, something from which liberation theologians have drawn as it associates the divine with care for the least of these—orphans, widows, the desolate, prisoners. So the old Hebrew poet’s God is siding with just causes and trying to tip the scales back in favor of the lowly and the downtrodden. Yet the ancient images remain, associating the holy with storms and skies and sovereign, even military, power. (I might also note that the lectionary has deliberately omitted some of the most violent images perhaps because they’re simply too troublesome to deal with.) So I read the text this week and sat with it unhappily for a while. I didn’t accept it and I didn’t quite reject it; I simply tried to attend to what it stirred in me. And that’s what I would encourage you to do. For we deal in sacred stories every week, and our work is not to approve or disapprove so much as to ask what they touch on. Sometimes the sacred stories inspire us with visions of our best ideas. At other times, the sacred stories trouble us and leave us to consider making a counter-affirmation. This week, I can’t really affirm this psalm; I can only offer the mixed review that the dualism it describes seems illusory to me while the longing for justice is something that I think I can

⁴ Psalm 68.2a.

understand. Ultimately, I am choosing to see this text not as an enemy but as a somewhat confused friend that may reveal something about all of us.

Thich Nhat Hanh seems far less confused to me and all the more challenging for it. In his books and talks he continues to invite people to see that our differences are creations of the mind when compared to our similarities. We are all related, he keeps saying, we are all one family. No enemies. Only brothers and sisters. This does not mean that we are not still engaged in terrible conflict; on the contrary, it means that the conflict stems from our failure to see the other in ourselves.

At the end of Thich Nhat Hanh's dharma talks, a bowl is struck, which resonates deeply throughout the meditation hall. Then the quiet monk smiles and bows to his hearers, who smile and bow in return. And for a moment the habits of mind fall away and there is only the warm recognition of community. There are no enemies, he says. Which is another way of saying love your enemies. Would that we, Baptists and Buddhists, could grasp this truth.

May it be so.