

## Harvard Divinity School · Learning to Love Your Enemies: A Conversation with Rev. Matthew Potts

## ^ Episode Transcript

These past few years, it's felt like the ground has been shifting beneath us. A pandemic, political division, cultural shifts—all of it has changed how we live together and what we expect of one another.

I'm sure we've all noticed how easily disagreement turns personal now, how quickly conversation can slide into conflict. And it's not just politics. It shows up in our friendships, our families, and our communities.

And when that happens, it can start to feel like the people we disagree with aren't just wrong—they're against us. That they are our enemy.

That word has been on my mind—enemy. Because it's a word that carries real weight and even danger, but it also carries real possibility.

I'm Jonathan Beasley, and this is the *Harvard Religion Beat*.

Today, I'm speaking with the [Rev. Matthew Potts](#), Professor of Religion and Literature at Harvard Divinity School and Pusey Minister at [Harvard's Memorial Church](#). His book, *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account*, looks at forgiveness not as resolution, but as mourning—a way of living honestly with what can't be undone.

And lately, he's been preaching about one of the hardest teachings in scripture: to love your enemies.

Matthew Potts: And the line I really want to focus on, or at least build up to, is the, there are lots of hard ones in this passage, but the hard one, "love your enemies." It's important what Jesus doesn't say here. Jesus doesn't say make friends of your enemies. He says, "Love your enemies." He's presuming that they remain your enemies, that they are the ones who are against you, who threaten harm or cause harm. That's hard. It's hard to make sense of.

Jonathan Beasley: He preached those words at Harvard's Memorial Church, in the heart of Harvard Yard. It's one thing to appreciate the idea of loving your enemies but it's another to really consider what it demands.

That's where forgiveness comes in—not as an excuse or to give someone a pass for the harm they've caused, but as a way of living with pain without letting it define us.

Jonathan Beasley: In your book, *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account*, you describe forgiveness as an act of mourning, a way of living with the unalterable fact that harm has been done. What changes when we view forgiveness not as a resolution, but as a form of grief?

Matthew Potts: Yeah, that's a great question. I think my worry about the way forgiveness is conceived or practiced in a lot of Christian communities is that it does not allow people to continue feeling all the complex emotions of harm. If forgiveness is a miraculous resolution, then why am I still angry? Why am I still hurting? Why do I not trust the person who hurt me yet?

And if you look at the Christian tradition, what has often happened, especially in late modern

Christianity, is this intense pressure towards, oh, if you've forgiven, then you're not allowed to be angry anymore. Oh, if you've forgiven, then why can't we be reconciled? Those are the places where I think forgiveness gets very complicated and sometimes harmful for people who have suffered harm.

But if you think instead of forgiveness as a way to say, like, the thing that happened, the harm that was done cannot be undone, the effects of it can be mitigated or redressed. But the fact of that harm cannot be undone. And part of what living with the fact that harm means is living with the fact of it, deciding that this is unalterable. And having a good life or living a good future means living with that fact. That's how I think forgiveness operates as mourning.

Jonathan Beasley: What Rev. Potts is calling for is an honest reckoning with what's happened—and a way to keep living in spite of it. It's a hard truth in any setting, but it's also what makes forgiveness possible.

Because for him, forgiveness isn't about erasing pain; it's about acknowledging it, staying awake to it, and refusing to let it turn into bitterness.

It's a very different view from the old adage we've all heard: forgive and forget, which he doesn't subscribe to.

Matthew Potts: No. Yeah, absolutely not. I mean, I think that adage is a problem because if you forget, then that means, oh, the harm didn't happen. Again, then why are you still angry? Why can't we be friends?

Forgiveness, I mean, if you just think about definitionally what it means to forgive, I can't forgive a nothing. And I also can't forgive a good thing. I forgive a wrong. And so if I say to you, I forgive you, part of what is implied in that act of grace, in that saying is you wronged me. And so if part of what's implied when I say I forgive you is you wronged me, that means that the wrong stands.

What's different is not whether or not the wrong still exists in history or in my heart or in the world

or even it's ongoing effects in the future. What's different is how I'm going to respond to the fact that you wronged me.

So forgiveness is future-oriented in the fact that it makes a determination about how I'm going to react to a harm which cannot be undone. I think, too often, forgiveness is understood as a way to undo the past. Rather, it's a way to shape the future with a past that is unalterable.

Jonathan Beasley: You've said that forgiveness is an act of love that can accommodate anger. That's perhaps not how most people think about love. So what does that love require of us, then?

Matthew Potts: It's not the way most people think about love. I think you're right. But if you ask people about their loving relationships, of course they're angry. Of course anger is part of those relationships.

I mean, the most obvious example is, like, I'm a parent. I have kids. I love them more than anything. I am angry with them sometimes. Figuring out how to use that anger in a way that is loving, how to experience that inward emotion in a way that doesn't bear out as sadness or harm for them is really important. I'm not saying let your anger run wild. But feeling angry towards people we love is—that's OK. Feelings are feelings. With Christian ethics, Christian morals should be about how we behave in the world, not how we feel necessarily, right? And I think if we think about our most loving relationships, anger is part of them.

Matthew Potts: So what does loving look like for these folks who potentially cause me harm or who have caused me harm in the past? I think anger could be part of that because if you can be angry at your kids and consider that loving, certainly you can be angry at your enemies. And still try to think about, OK, what would a loving relationship to these folks be, even if it's one where I don't trust them, or I'm angry at them, or I'm demanding some redress for them? How do I do that lovingly?

Jonathan Beasley: That's the heart of it. Love that includes anger isn't sentimental; it's moral. It's the

refusal to return harm for harm. That doesn't mean reconciliation—it doesn't even mean trust. It means recognizing that even those who've wronged us still carry the same dignity we do.

Rev. Potts, you often talk about love not just as something personal, but as a public responsibility. Given everything happening in the country right now, how do we hold on to that kind of love?

Matthew Potts: If you look at the Christian New Testament, Jesus doesn't spend a lot of time talking about how you ought to feel you'll towards the people you love. He talks about how you ought to behave, and in that sense, love is already a public thing. It's about actions out in the world.

For me, I mean, a lot of the book and a lot of my thinking about Christian ethics comes from the Sermon on the Mount, comes from Matthew 5 and 6 and 7 and whatever and Jesus's teachings there.

And it seems to me a lot of what he's trying to describe when he says, love your enemy, love your neighbor as yourself, is he's trying to describe what this looks like in a broader scale, not just the most intimate, personal, or interpersonal scales. And what he's pointing towards is something that you might put in secular terms as a fundamental human dignity.

Every person, whether they're my antagonist or my intimate, bears some fundamental human dignity. And I think the rationale he has for it is that God loves everybody. God loves your enemy as much as God loves your neighbor as much as God loves you. And so if you're thinking about how to react to wrongdoing in the world, the starting point has to be, like, but God loves the person who harmed me.

So anything I do towards that person has to be recognized, has to still recognize the fact and honor the fact that this person who harmed me remains beloved of God, still has dignity, if you're going to use more secular terms. And so this is what love looks like, starts to look like in public.

Jonathan Beasley: You have been talking about some of Jesus's teachings, and especially when he was meeting people not with certainty, but with presence. What does that look like for our

churches or even our politics to be more there, to be more fluent in uncertainty? What does that look like?

Matthew Potts: I think that this is a real tension in the way we think about Christian ethics or the way we think about Christian life or discipleship.

To me, this is the real. The richness and the complexity of Christian life and Christian preaching and leading Bible studies is both inviting people into this posture of what Christians would call repentance, penitence, that we're not perfect and that we can't be perfect, but also the obligation to stand up against injustice, to say which things in the world are wrong and deserves some response.

Umm...You have to be honest with yourself and honest with others and also willing to be wrong, willing to stand up and say, even though that I don't everything, I know this much. And then next week to be proven that I had the wrong opinion and to stand up again and say, you're right, I was wrong because I'm not perfect, but also this. I mean, that's also maybe the preacher's posture.

Jonthan Beasley: That kind of humility feels rare right now—the courage to take a stand, but also to say, I might be wrong.

Let's dive into the classroom. I'm specifically thinking about your class "Forgiveness," where you're asking students questions like: "When are we obliged to forgive?" and "Does forgiveness foster peace at the expense of justice?" How do students respond to these questions, and what has their thinking taught you?

Matthew Potts: What I usually say at the beginning of the class and what I said at the beginning of that class was that this class is not going to have answers. And also, a lot of people have personal relationships to forgiveness. This is not going to be a place where we work all that stuff out.

I said, the only thing I ask of you, you don't have to agree with forgiveness. You don't have to think

forgiveness is right. But the class is going to begin with the premise that from the Christian tradition, that loving your enemy is a rationally possible thing.

That doesn't mean we don't get to be really critical about, what does love mean? It doesn't mean we get to think really critically about what the enemy's obligations are, all these things. But that if you're in this class, and you're trying to take a class in forgiveness, but you think that the proper moral posture towards your enemy is hatefulness, you might find the class interesting. But as an intellectual exercise, you're going to have to entertain the possibility of love, love for your enemy.

I'm not telling you, you have to love your enemy. I'm not telling you that by the end of the class, you're going to be persuaded by it. But this class in Christian theology is going to begin from the idea that love for your enemy is something that's rationally possible.

And I found folks, some folks in that room who radically disagreed about the appropriate way to treat one's enemy. We're willing to engage in the thought experiment together. What does it mean to love your enemy if I'm going to do that? And some of the students are, like, I'm not sure I'm going to do that yet. It depends on what answers we come up with, if I'm going to love my enemy. But if I'm going to love my enemy, what would that look like? What does love look like? All these things. Yeah.

Jonathan Beasley: As our conversation wound down, I kept thinking about how these questions—about forgiveness, anger, and love—don't end in the classroom. They follow Rev. Potts back to the pulpit at Harvard's Memorial Church, where he preaches to a community that's also trying to live them out. Because it's one thing to talk about loving your enemies in theory. It's another to practice it—to actually believe that love, even the hard kind, is still possible.

Back to his sermon, he said it this way:

Matthew Potts: God loves you. God loves us all. God loves the folks you don't like. God loves the

people who have hurt you. God loves the people you would like to hurt or are hurting. God loves those you do not and cannot love. God loves those who can't love you.

Jonathan Beasley: That's the hard part. This impossible love has been passed on to us because it's hard to love your enemies.

That line—this impossible love has been passed on to us —stays with me. It's not sentimental or easy. It's a call to live differently, to resist the reflex to strike back, and to trust that love can be stronger than what divides us. That's the kind of love and forgiveness Rev. Potts describes—not forgetting, not excusing, but choosing a future that refuses to mirror harm. It's a kind of love that makes room for anger but doesn't let anger have the last word.

My thanks to the Rev. Matthew Potts for this conversation. You can find his book at your local bookstore, and you can find his sermons on the [Memorial Church's website](#).

I'm Jonathan Beasley. Thanks for listening.

Show notes:

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