

I want to share an article by Brian Doyle that was published in the January 22, 2014 issue of *The Christian Century*. It is called, "Notes on Loving Your Neighbor."

(read article)

This article brings up the real struggle of following Jesus teaching in our gospel reading. We are once again reading an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount. Once again Jesus has set the standards impossibly high for us. Love your enemies - and not just in a fake way, but a real way.

One thing I like that Brian Doyle does in his article. He dismisses what I call Darth Vader goodness. If you're a Star Wars fan you know that Luke Skywalker insists there is some good in evil Darth Vader and he risks everything to bring it out. He says, "I can feel the good in him." But that is foolishness. Don't look to find goodness in the evil people of history. Brian Doyle says, "Their souls [probably] roast in hells fired by the eternal fuel of their evil egos!"

It is a commendable thing to look for the good in other people and try to bring it out, but that is not revolutionary enough for Jesus' teachings. He means an even greater love. And here is where I disagree with Doyle. He makes it sound like we, by our own efforts, need to keep driving ourselves to remember that even these evil people are children of God, and created in the image of God.

But I challenge anyone who by their own power thinks they can create such love. I think they're fooling themselves. You simply can't love like that. Instead, do this. Don't force yourself to love. Simply accept that God loves. Accept that God loves these impossibly unlovable and evil people. Jesus died for you. And he died for the bin Ladens and Hitlers and Stalins too. It is by the strength and power of the cross that I can love them. It is not by my own power.

Let me bring the situation closer to home, because loving these super villains is really only theoretical. We haven't had to actually interact with them. Have you ever been in a situation where there is this indescribable tension between

yourself and someone close to you - a spouse, or your child, or maybe your parents, or a neighbor or someone? You can't figure out what it is that you did wrong but you want to rectify it. And so in honesty and vulnerability you approach that person and genuinely ask, "What's wrong? How have I hurt you? I don't understand."

And hopefully that person can recognize your honesty and love and respond in a way that you can break the tension of the problem. Perhaps it doesn't happen right away, but it does happen in time.

But then, what happens if the tension never does break? Or what happens if the person you are trying to build a relationship replies with some form of this comment: "It's not what you've done that's wrong. It's who you are that's wrong."

That person has now dismissed you as a human being. There is no way to reconcile. There is no way to build a relationship of any form. How do you love in that situation? Nothing you do can bring about a constructive solution.

Let Jesus do the impossible loving. Imagine the cross standing between yourself and the other person. And as you look at him or her through the cross you find yourself saying, "I can't love you. I just can't do it genuinely. But this is Jesus' love for you. And I'm going to let the power of that love rule my behavior with you." Amen