



# What it Ain't

## Opening

What if our theology could get up from our armchairs and move into our world? That would be something worth paying attention to. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

<intro song> Lay your guns down, down on the floor. There ain't no good in those guns anymore. Take my hand and let me kiss your cheek. Let our friendship be sweet. <end>

“Because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others and eventually if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself.”

“And I don't think that we can say we love someone and then shoot them. It doesn't make sense.”

“I always tell folks that, ‘Look at - if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up.’”

“How do we encourage people to see nonviolence as something more than a position about war?”

“Because we're not just sitting around doing podcasts and theology, we're actually trying to live our lives as Christians.”

<song> This is a reckoning between you and me. The righting of all wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

## Introduction

**Kevin Wiebe:** We're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode number ten, called “What It Ain't.” I'm Kevin Wiebe.

**Jesse Penner:** And I'm Jesse Penner and we are your hosts today. We've been looking at the peace position, our call to love our enemies over the last many episodes, and we've taken some looks at how people who are outside of this position, people who don't agree with us, can sometimes distort or twist what it is that we understand about peace. But it's also true that as we live this out and talk about this in our own communities there is always risk of taking what Jesus has called us to and twisting it to justify or to rationalize

or to sort of hold up practices that are actually unhealthy and anti what Jesus taught. So today we're looking at how we love our enemies and what that doesn't mean, how maybe the church has misused some of that stuff in the past, what clarifications we need to make in order to make sure we're doing this well and where it's easy for us to end up going wrong when we're thinking about loving our enemies.

**KW:** We have an excellent panel of guests to discuss this very important topic today. We'll be talking to Betty Pries, to pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler, to Dr. Carol Penner, as well as to pastor Brian Zahnd.

**JP:** We're going to start off by talking with Betty Pries. She is the CEO and senior consultant of the mediation company called Creedence and Co. She's also the instructor of the conflict management program at Conrad Grebel University College and the author of *The Space Between Us*. We asked Betty what loving our enemies doesn't mean. How has the church misused these teachings and what are clarifications that we need to remember as we go through this.

### **What does loving our enemies NOT mean?**

**Dr. Betty Pries:** So in my experience one of the mistakes that we sometimes make in the church is that we say that to love our enemies means that we don't need to hold any boundaries. And in my experience that's problematic. Loving our enemies does not mean we say, "it's okay for you to harm me." Loving our enemies does not say you can walk all over me. Loving our enemies says I love you. I care for you. I love you so much. But I will also have healthy boundaries around you and I will invite you to have healthy boundaries around me.

Healthy boundaries is – I don't know if that's the language that is really well known, but the idea is that if I am compassionate, compassionate, compassionate, compassionate to everybody around me what ends up happening is I burn out. I'm giving and giving and I'm giving and I'm not replenishing my own tank and we see this in the church frequently, people give and give and give and give and we hold up those people. "She never cared for herself," and we hold that up as such a virtue. But in the process, the person starts to die inside, the caregiver starts to die inside. So what ends up happening is as the caregiver dies inside their ability to care becomes weaker and weaker and people can get resentful.

So loving our enemies is about taking care of ourselves, replenishing our tank and when the person around us is doing harm, it's also about having the capacity to say "no, that's not okay." If we never say "no, that that something's not okay" we actually perpetuate harm not just to ourselves, but to the world around us.

I often think about loving our enemies as involving two hands. One is an open hand of grace. This is goodness, generosity, grace, love, all those good things. One is a hand that

looks more like a stop sign, which is the hand of boundaries that says “hang on, there are some limitations here in terms of what's acceptable in our relationship.” If we have both hands open we open ourselves too much, if we have both hands closed we have no relationship. So the wisdom here is to have an open hand of grace and a hand of boundaries.

All of our relationships need healthy boundaries. They need to have this boundary of where we how deeply we accept others into our lives, and if we're too open, I think we make ourselves vulnerable to harm, and we're actually not practicing the gospel.

But there's something about how Jesus preaches in Matthew about turning the other cheek that we have to be paying attention to. We often think about turning of the cheek as sort of give and give and give and give. But if you look at Middle Eastern culture and you look at the construction of the text, turning the other cheek was actually both being loving and holding accountable at the very same time. It says if somebody hits you on one cheek, offer them the other. Well, if somebody hits you on one cheek and you offer them the other, the way Middle Eastern culture worked by offering them the other cheek it actually caused the person doing the hitting to become self-reflective. Because they were forced to either hit the person as an equal, or they're forced to use their hand in a way that shamed them. It's a little bit complicated to explain, but the idea here is that turning the other cheek is both an act of grace and an act of accountability at the very same time. Because the turning of the cheek, the way that works invites the person to either treat you as an equal or to be self-reflective about why they're doing what they're doing.

**KW:** We spoke to Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler, who is the pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church and the author of the book *How to Have an Enemy*. We talked to her about this question as well, about what loving our enemy doesn't mean, and maybe some important clarifications that we need to make around this subject. She brought up an important point about first asking the question who is our enemy?

**MFB:** If we start by asking who is my enemy, I think we're starting off with some assumptions about conflict. That we are in some ways, opening the door to the potential for conflict, the potential for truth telling about ourselves, about our relationships, about how we have been enemies to others. One of my concerns is that I think what we have often seen in our churches is a sort of desire for, I think what would be called, a false unity, where if we can sort of put aside these questions about power and harm, if we can set aside these questions about difference, then that actually provides us the space for what we have in common.

That's really important - to talk about what we share together and it's also really, really important for us to take seriously the things that actually also continue the patterns that we want to leave behind when we enter into a relationship of following Jesus and to recognize that those aren't just internal to us. Those aren't about just about me personally

and my orientation personally towards the world, but actually towards people, towards land, towards history, towards politics and ignoring those questions doesn't make them go away, it just creates a sort of seething that happens underneath. I think a lot of what we're seeing in our communities now is the eruption of that, the sort of thing that we've wanted to push down for so long that now it's coming out in really unhealthy and problematic ways.

**JP:** We sat down with Dr. Carol Penner, who is professor and Director of Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. Once again, we presented her with this same question. What does loving our enemies not mean? And how is the church distorted this sometimes? And what are clarifications that we need to remember as we think about Jesus's call in our lives.

**Dr. Carol Penner:** I wanted to tackle this in a couple of ways.

First off, I think Jesus' call to love our enemies is really important because we make enemies. It's not just that we have bad things done to us and now we have enemies because they're hurting us. Sometimes we are hurting other people and we are treating them as enemies. And so they are our enemies because we have made them such, and so Jesus wants us to love our enemies, which means don't make enemies, don't do violence to other people. Sometimes we think of enemies as just the people who aren't nice to us, when really it's our responsibility to not make enemies.

Sometimes in the Anabaptist tradition there's an idea that when you love your enemy, you must always sacrifice everything, even your life, to love them. A good example of this is the image of Dirk Willems going and rescuing the person who was drowning. You know, his jailer, who then arrested him and then Dirk was burned at the stake. And that's held up as the great Anabaptist image. We must love people like Dirk Willems.

And yet that I feel, was a heroic, wonderful event at that moment, if Dirk wanted to do that and felt called to do that definitely, you know, we should revere him for that. However, that's not the only image in the Bible of how to act faithfully. God delivered people from violence in many ways as well, like God said, "let my people go" and he took people away from violence. And so in the Bible we have this push-pull towards sacrifice. You love people and you give your life for them. But sometimes you love people and you won't let them hurt you anymore and you leave.

I see this particularly in the situation of domestic violence, that too often women are told "you must stay, God will change him and that's your cross to bear, is that hard marriage" whereas I think just as often God is saying, "let my people go, she is being abused in this. Why should she stay and be a doormat and let her husband continue to hurt her?" She should leave and get help, and perhaps then he would get help as well. As long as she stays and absorbs the violence or feels trapped and can't leave, this person has free rein to keep

on hurting people. Sometimes there's sacrifice involved when we love someone who's hurting us, but sometimes it's faithful to walk away and say I'm not going to let you keep hurting me. We're leaving.

**KW:** Pastor Brian Zahnd is the founding pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, MO, and he's the author of ten books, including a *Farewell to Mars* and his most recent book *When Everything's on Fire*. We talked to him about this topic as well, about where the church has possibly misused the teachings of Jesus about loving our enemies and about peace, and he makes some important clarifications for us about what the church is supposed to do and about certain distinctions about what our role actually is.

**Brian Zahnd:** One of the things that we have to understand is the distinction between the church as an alternative society and the civil function of the larger society. Let me explain by giving an illustration.

I'm a pastor. I've been the pastor of one church for 40 years. My younger brother Eric is the prosecutor in North Kansas City. And so we have the two Zahnd brothers, one's a pastor, one's a prosecutor. We need both, but they serve very different functions and you can't conflate the two. In a healthy society, we have court systems that take the responsibility for prosecuting injustice away from the individual. So if someone is assaulted, let's say a member of my church is assaulted, I can counsel forgiveness. I can try to help lead my parishioner into a position of forgiveness because it's the only way that they regain agency over their own story and don't just remain a perpetual victim – and then there's many other reasons, this is what Christ calls us to. But having, successfully perhaps, helped this person come to a posture of forgiveness it doesn't mean that the perpetrator is exonerated. They may be forgiven, but if I tell my brother, you know I led my parishioner into a position of forgiveness towards his assailant. He would say “great, now we're gonna put him in jail.” Because that's a different role.

So forgiveness is not saying that it was right or all right or it is all right. Forgiveness is saying, “I on my part, am going to turn this over to God,” but that also may involve, in healthy societies, turning it over to the wider society through criminal justice to handle the matter, this is why the church doesn't want to be the state. Or it shouldn't – I mean I say that, but the church spends an awful lot of time trying to be the state, and I think that's not the route to go.

Forgiveness is not an exoneration or a statement that what happened wasn't wrong. To be honest though, Kevin, I don't see the church doing that that much. I mean I don't come from an Anabaptist history, so maybe that's been more prominent in the Anabaptist world. If anything else, I see the opposite problem in that that Christians are not really taught the way of forgiveness, but they're separate things. So the individual forgives but the society says, “yeah, but this person still has to be held responsible.”

**KW:** I really appreciated Pastor Brian's thoughts on all of this, Jesse. It's a good reminder about the church to sometimes stay in our lane and also to differentiate between the difference between forgiveness and justice. That just because we forgive that, that doesn't mean that there is not also justice going on hand in hand with that.

I was also thinking about the importance of context here as well, that he doesn't come from an Anabaptist context, but as someone who has more exposure to that community that's one of those things that that we've been exposed to, where we would have seen some of these things play out a little bit more, where with all of this language about loving our enemies and forgiveness where it can sometimes be used almost as a weapon against those who have been hurt. Where, "well, now it's time for you to forgive and now it's time for you to move on instead of seeking justice." Or instead of making things right where there's no restitution or there's no proper amends made, or those sorts of things. And then it's a way of just silencing people and dismissing people. And that is something that we have seen go terribly wrong in our communities whereas in in his context that's not something he would have witnessed terribly often and so context is something really quite important actually, as we talk about this, whereas in his context it's kind of a different sort of danger, which is not even to try it.

**JP:** I think that's exactly right. I think that when we hear Pastor Zahnd talk, he's talking about the dangers of under-forgiveness, right? The danger of not going far enough. And we look at it with our cultural heritage and our theological heritage as Anabaptists, and as Mennonites, and we maybe see the ways where it has been distorted and used and overused in contexts where it actually caused damage because it wasn't being taught or used in the right ways. We weren't looking at Jesus anymore, we were looking at how to sort of smooth things over in our church communities in ways that were actually unhealthy.

So to me it's a reminder of the fact that sin exists, right? We're all fallen and regardless of our theological tradition, there are traps that we have to avoid falling into. And when we think about forgiveness, so looking at Pastor Zahnd's background, there was a sense of under-forgiveness, or that forgiveness wasn't even being really being tried, that reconciliation wasn't being sought and there's a negative there. I think we can also take some of our righteous words around this words like forgiveness and enemy love and a desire to focus on Sermon on the Mount ethics, kingdom ethics, and twist those into things that are harmful in different ways, but in some ways we're actually kind of getting back to the same place where it breaks relationship and it creates division and it creates injustice in our communities because we're not dealing with this idea of forgiveness well. So even though there are two very different contexts at play here in terms of Pastor Zahnd's background and ours, these issues around forgiveness play out regardless of your theological background.

**KW:** Sin causes brokenness, and it's Jesus's way that brings healing right ultimately, and we can twist that, and that's what we're talking about today, is the ways we can go wrong.

We are continuing our conversation with Pastor Brian Zahnd. I asked him even for someone who is extremely dedicated to the position of nonviolence, where do we need to be careful? Where is it easy for us to go wrong with Jesus' teaching? This is what he had to say.

**Where do we need to be careful? Where is it easy for us to go wrong with Jesus' teaching?**

**BZ:** Well, I don't know, Kevin. I don't see too many problems that arise from people wrongly loving their enemies. What I see is people who don't even bother to try to love their enemies. I mean, I suppose it can happen, but that hasn't been my experience. If we're gonna talk about loving enemies, what do we mean by that? We're not talking about a certain feeling towards people. We're not talking about a naivete. We're talking about how in imitation of Jesus Christ, who is the perfect revelation of who God the Father is we seek the well-being of everyone, even those that position themselves as an enemy to us. On our part, we're not seeking to have an enemy, if they regard us as an enemy then we seek to still seek their well-being and we don't actively seek their harm.

Now I can think of all kinds of scenarios where in the immediate moment you know, what does that mean? I don't know. I mean, you know, in immediate moments of violence, what does that mean? I don't know. We can talk about that if you like. But I'm talking about from a distance, in the moments of relative safety in the moment, we are not desirous of harm visiting them, we are desirous of their well-being and that includes the redemption of their soul, that is, their returning to their full humanity and becoming who they're supposed to be. It doesn't mean that we necessarily accept them as they are in their evil, if you wanna use that word.

Understanding that we can have enemies that have been assigned to us by the wider culture. And they just tell you, these are your enemies. To be a part of our club, our society, our nation, whatever, you have to hate these people. We have lots of enemies that may not at all even be evil. They might even be right. I think we have to be careful in always assuming that those that fill the role of the enemy in our life are necessarily even wrong. I mean, because we're speaking sort of in vague terms, do I mean an assailant that I meet in the parking lot that's trying to rob me? Or do I mean, if I'm a Republican, Democrats. We live in a time right now where Republicans view Democrats as enemies and vice versa. And I'm going to say I don't even know if that's a healthy way to approach it and then when it falls down into the church, this is where it's terrible, where we allow our church to be formed by a wider society that says, if you red you got to hate the blues, if you're blue you got to hate the reds. So what do we mean by an enemy? How proximate

is it? What kind of enemy are we talking about? So those are issues that we have to address and think about.

**JP:** We also asked this question of Dr. Carol Penner. This was her response.

**Dr. Carol Penner:** I think it's the same thing that I was just saying before that too often when we say we must love our enemies, it means we must let them just walk all over us and not resist, but nonviolence can also be nonviolent resistance, and so you can resist the enemy but that doesn't mean you have to harm them. It could be that you just stopped them from doing violence. For example, I think most people, if they were attacked, would call the police and get someone to come in here and stop this from happening rather than just say, "well, I must love my enemy so I'm just going to let this happen." We want the violence to stop. That is important. But do we want to take a gun and protect ourselves and shoot someone? I don't think so.

**KW:** We also asked this question of pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler. Where is it easy for us to use the teachings of Jesus around peace and nonviolence and all of this in a way that Jesus did not intend.

**MFB:** I mean, church history is just a lesson of people taking the teachings of Jesus and you know, finding ways to use those for their own power, for conquering, for domination and also, for retribution and revenge. I think that this is also one of the places that we have to walk really tenderly with these teachings that Jesus has given us. We're also given this invitation to start building a world that is also good for even those who harm us, that starts to dismantle systems and forms of life that keep us locked into forms of oppression. And so even thinking "what does it mean to not revisit harm upon someone who's harmed me? But to find other ways to channel my anger and my frustration into building a new kind of world."

**KW:** As a mediator, Betty Pries is someone who works a lot with conflict. She also specializes in working with churches. And so I asked her, as someone who's worked with a lot of churches in very difficult seasons in their history, where is it easy for churches and for us as Christians to go wrong as we seek to actually live out these teachings of loving our enemies?

**BP:** Yeah, I think where we are tempted to go wrong is that if we're really honest with ourselves, when someone has harmed us the temptation is to want to destroy the other, or want somehow some in some way for the other to be destroyed. Whether it's literal destruction or figuratively speaking, but there is this temptation: let the other be stopped somehow. I think the psalmist helps us here. The psalmist gives voice to anger and lament.



See the irony is that when we are so committed to nonviolence, we can do that in a way that then causes us to deny our pain and our anger. We offer that again: when we are deeply committed to nonviolence, what can happen is that we end up denying our anger and our pain. Anger is valuable because it indicates to us that something's not okay, and so if you read the Psalms there are psalms of deep anger and lament. These are really, really, really hard prayers that the psalmist is offering. But once we externalize our anger and our lament, we are no longer under their power.

See if I have anger and lament within me but I'm so committed to nonviolence that I don't give voice to that anger and that lament, all of that anger and lament can go internal and cause significant illness for us individually and significant harm to each other in different kinds of ways that might internalize anger will come out in different ways that people around me. If I can say to a trusted friend or therapist or colleague and say "I am really angry about this, I am really sad," once we've externalized that anger with someone in the presence of someone who can care for us, it allows us to no longer be under the power of our anger, which allows us to return to nonviolence.

I once was walking with a friend and we were talking about nonviolence. And I said if we really want to practice nonviolence, we need to begin by practicing nonviolent, nonresistance to ourselves. And what I mean by that is let's assume that I am not yet capable of forgiving, that something has really harmed me. How do I practice nonviolent nonresistance to my feelings, that I'm not ready to forgive. What this means is holding myself with compassion, seeing myself through God's eyes. Where God looks at me and says "I know, dear, I know that you're not ready for this. Can you forgive yourself for not being ready yet? Can you forgive yourself for not being ready yet to forgive? Can you forgive yourself for feeling this strong anger? Can you hold yourself and your angry self, your lamenting self with compassion?" And when we practice this kind of nonviolent nonresistance to our own feelings of pain, then our feelings of pain stop having power over us, and we can start to think creatively about how to love our enemy, how to care for those around us, how to be nonviolent in our response to the other.

JP: This is a powerful conversation that we're having about these things. I sometimes wish we could do just one episode where at the end I stepped back and went "well, that sounds easy. This sounds attainable and doable, and like something that we could just sort of very easily switch in our lives."

KW: Just for once.

JP: I know! No, maybe we'll get there yet. We've got a few episodes left. We'll see.

KW: Maybe next season we'll pick an easier topic.

**JP:** Absolutely. But I do think that the fact that this is such a difficult thing is exactly what makes it such an engaging topic and something that we can speak about from so many different angles and have people come on and speak about all these significant things. Because it is something that we need to continue wrestling with.

I heard in a few places there are people talking about this tension between recognizing the real hurt and pain that has been done to us in some cases, and the hurt and the pain that we live with, while also being able to have the freedom to love well and to be in relationship with a community where there are those hurts that exist. It's this crazy thing. Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler talked about that a little bit, the idea of how do we build and how do we grow and are we willing to do that in a way that even helps and benefits our enemies? Are we willing to make a better world for the people that we hate? And how do we go through that?

As I was listening to this, what came to mind was Jeremiah. Jeremiah, of course, is the weeping prophet. He anguishes and laments over the pain of Israel's exile to Babylon, over this great hardship, over the great loss of that transition of being taken captive in that way. And yet, in the middle of that pain and in the middle of that loss, and without minimizing what has happened, he also with the prophetic voice of God, calls Israel to, this is from Jeremiah 29:7. "Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." [NIV] He's able to hold his grief and a recognition of the real pain of what is happening in one hand and also hold a deep trust in God that allows him to call the Israelite people to love their enemies and to live well in a land that they have been exiled to, along with their captors. It's a powerful statement of how we can do this well.

**KW:** I also appreciated Betty's comments about expressing and giving voice to the pain that we carry and not just holding that all in, and being compassionate with ourselves for experiencing those emotions and those pains and that in fact, when we just stuff that all away we're doing violence to ourselves in the process of that, because we think maybe we need to be good Christians and not feel these feelings. But it's actually good to recognize that they're there, that when we feel anger, it's good because there is an acknowledgement that something wrong actually happened. When we feel pain, it's for a reason, it's because something painful transpired and it's what we do with that that really, truly matters and as she pointed out, the Psalms give voice to a lot of this for us and give us a way in which we can express these things to the Lord, which is a very, very healthy process. Without reiterating it all, Betty did a great job of kind of talking us through how we can do that. But I think it's just a really powerful reminder for us to be gracious with ourselves as well and not beat ourselves up too bad because our emotions aren't keeping up with where we think they should be.

**JP:** Our closing song this episode is Different from Me by our very own Kevin Wiebe. This song looks at the breakdown of relationships and in an episode where we've explored

what it ain't, what it isn't, what we aren't called to in the context of enemy love and following Jesus teaching, this song recognizes the different ways that relationships breakdown when we're not focused on Jesus and instead get focused on the differences between us. This is Different from Me by Kevin Wiebe.

### **Different From Me, Kevin Aron**

Till death do us part, is what they once said  
Now he is alone, she's in some other's bed  
The years drifted by and oh how things change  
Love turned to scorn, then it turned into pain  
Now when they meet there is plenty of blame  
Not realizing how much they hurt just the same  
These battles go on, oh I wish we could see  
The reason we fight: your different from me.

Different from me.  
You're different from me.  
Different from me.

Best friends for so long take a walk to the pier  
One leaves his closet behind with great fear  
The other friend silently just walks away  
Leaves him alone for the rest of the day  
They finally talk, they're no longer friends  
I guess it's too much to get through in the end.  
These battles go on, oh I wish we could see  
The reason we fight: you're different from me.

Different from me.  
You're different from me.  
Different from me.

So we yell and we swear and we hate all the more  
You knock for some help and we just slam the door  
You start to yell back and it all starts again  
We fight and we feud so the other won't win  
But who is the winner and who's really lost  
We both choose to hate, what is really the cost?  
These battles go on, oh I wish we could see  
The reason we fight: you're different from me.

Different from me.  
You're different from me.  
Different from me.

These battles go on, oh I wish we could see  
The reason we fight: 'cause your different from me.

## Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

You can check us out online at [www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca](http://www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca) and find us on iTunes, Spotify, and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today. That was Betty Pries, Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler, Dr. Carol Penner and Pastor Brian Zahnd.

Our intro song is First Communion by Dane Joneshill and our feature song today was Different From Me by Kevin Aron.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr, our producer and audio engineer is Kevin Wiebe and our administrative assistant and wizard of all things web related is Ruth Block.

I'm Kevin Wiebe. And I'm Jesse Penner and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist. We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay is merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time as we continue our journey looking at the life of peace and talking about some really tough stuff. We will be digging into how to handle these conversations around peace and loving our enemies when it comes to those difficult situations of abuse and trauma, that's next time on The Armchair Anabaptist.

\*Edited for clarity.