



The Tough Stuff

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: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode 11, and we are calling it The Tough Stuff. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner and we are your hosts. We are digging into some tricky territory today as we look at the difficult experiences that can come out of a peace position or the communities that have held to this. We recognize that many people listening to this podcast even have experienced difficult, even terrible, situations in life, being forced to live through abuse or violence. Without misusing or abusing the concept

of loving our enemies, what does it mean for someone in those really difficult situations to love their enemies in a way that's consistent with the teaching of Jesus?

KW: This is the really delicate and difficult kind of discussion that we are wading into today and our guests are joining us with a lot of courage and a lot of wisdom to talk to us about this important but sensitive topic. We will be talking to Betty Pries, to Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler, to pastor Brian Zahnd, as well as we will be hearing from Stephanie Travis, Jennifer and Deborah from the Many Rooms Church Community, which is a network of house churches in Winnipeg's North End.

JP: We're going to start out with Betty Pries. She is the CEO and senior consultant of a mediation company called Creedence and Co. She's also the instructor of the conflict management program at Conrad Greble University College, and she's the author of the book *The Space Between Us*. These concepts around enemy love can easily be misused or abused when it comes to people who are in abusive or violent situations. We asked Betty how we can talk about following the teachings of Jesus in these difficult contexts.

How can we talk about following the teachings of Jesus in difficult contexts?

Dr. Betty Pries: Yeah, that's a really good question. There is so much pain in the world. Really deep pain. My own parents are refugees, and so I know really intimately from their lived experience of how painful, how awful living through abuse and violence can be. And so sometimes in response to your question, I would say that there are times when we can give others permission to carry our commitment to nonviolence for us. There are times when we might not yet be ready.

Thinking about the violence and murder of the Amish of those Amish girls in a school in the United States, by now about 20 years ago. Nobody in that situation asked the immediate families to make public declarations of nonviolence. But the community around those families, they carried the commitment to nonviolence on the family's behalf. So I think there's something about community. It's very hard to do nonviolence on our own. It's much more effective, I think, much easier to do nonviolence when we are supported by a larger community of faith that can carry our nonviolence for us.

If there's someone experiencing deep abuse and violence, let them be the ones who carry for a moment the nonviolent commitment, while we attend to our pain and while we attend to our healing. Now there are some among us who will go to the place of nonviolence very quickly, who will go to the place of love and grace very quickly and that's wonderful. I just want to make sure we don't miss the fact that sometimes our community can do this while we're still on our own healing journey.

The other thing that I would say is, when I think about loving our enemies there is this thing about being able to say no. Like Jesus said, no. There's also living in a spirit of

gelassenheit. That's a German word, which means a kind of a spirit of surrender. And what I mean by that is, how do I hold boundaries, love the enemy and also not need things to be exactly as I need them to be?

How do I say this differently? There's something about if I cling too hard that I need everything to go my way, I will lose the ability to be creative about how to respond in this situation. If I even cling too hard to my life, I will lose the ability to think creatively and faithfully about how to respond to this situation. And if I don't listen deeply to God's leading, maybe this is where I'm wanting to go with this; we must be listening deeply with the spirit of surrender to God's leading. Otherwise, if we don't...

Making a decision towards nonviolence is a lifelong commitment. It's something that we need to be trained in, over and over and over again as we age and as we encounter new situations. Nonviolence is not something that happens out there. It's something that happens first and foremost in my own heart and spirit. It's how do I relate to myself? How do I relate to the people around me who are close to me? And then finally, how do I relate to my enemies? In each of these – the people are close to me, to myself, to my enemies – in each of these situations I think we're being invited to be trained and retrained to align ourselves deeply to God's presence within us, and that God's presence, that spirit, that breath of God living in us and through us, if we can practice fidelity to that, it allows us, I think, to be better at discerning when we come with grace and when we say no or how to hold grace and boundaries at the very same time.

JP: Pastor Brian Zahnd is the founding pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, MO. He's the author of ten books, including a *Farewell to Mars*, his most recent book is *When Everything's On Fire*. We asked Pastor Zahnd this same question, and he came back with a clear response. It's an important reminder for those of us who have walked through or are walking through situations of abuse and violence.

Brian Zahnd: Well, if you're talking about a situation of ongoing abuse domestically within a home, I mean, the first step is to find safety. Whatever that involves, someone leaving or an intervention by the state or some or something, as long as the...

We're not talking about someone being persecuted actively for their Christian faith. We're not talking about a Bonhoeffer situation. We're talking about just domestic abuse, the first step is just to find safety. There are resources for that to happen hopefully.

Then, we begin to go into the healing, but only after that. I mean we do prioritize that immediate, let's find safety and then if the person is going to eventually recover at some point, the issue of forgiveness comes up and the forgiveness is not, as I've already stated, it's not a declaration that they have not been wronged and that the offender was not acting wrongly. No, it's saying "I am not, on my part, going to hold them owing me anything. I release them to God. I release them to God. And I'm not going to forever tell

my story as one who is their victim, and I release them to God.” It doesn't mean having a certain feeling, it just means “I no longer am going to make them pay. I release them to God. I forgive them. I release them of their debt to me personally.”

Now the wider society may say that's fine, but we have a role to play in what we wrote to kind of addressed that. But if we're talking about domestic abuse I don't even really want to talk about forgiveness until we've achieved safety.

KW: Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler is the pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church and the author of the book *How to Have an Enemy*. When we talked to her about this question of how to delicately talk about this concept of loving our enemies with folks who have been through some really terrible situations, this is what she had to say.

Melissa Florer-Bixler: I've always thought that the love that Jesus offers us is incredibly robust, right? Because it also is a love that takes into account that we are accountable for the harm that we do to one another, that harm, abuse, destruction, cannot be healed or changed or altered by ignoring it or pushing it to the side, pretending it didn't happen, there's something consistently in Jesus where he talks about repentance. We have to come face to face with the ways that we have continued in hurt and harm in order to be able to say “okay, what can we do now? What does it actually mean for justice to happen in this situation? What does it actually mean in this particularity for us to hold people accountable?” Not in a way that then permanently removes them or cancels them or says that there's no way for them to return. But that has appropriate consequences, but also an invitation back into community in whatever way that's still possible, in whatever ways that accountability can happen within the fullness and wholeness of that community life.

As we know from our own Anabaptism, some people don't want that, right? We recognize people resist the desire for that truth telling about themselves. And when that happens, we also recognize the heartbreak of communities that can no longer accommodate people who do harm. I actually think that the history of the ban in our tradition is incredibly important. It is the alternative process that we've created to both take seriously harm and for an invitation to return and so just as a Mennonite, as an Anabaptist, I continually look back at that history to understand how this process can look in our churches.

KW: Something I appreciated about what Betty Pries said was her comments about how a community can carry someone while they're attending to their own pain, and I thought that was a very profound observation. That when we are going through something difficult, if we're part of a healthy community, that those communities can support us as we are wounded or going through something difficult. Even as we're talking about a very delicate topic, that's kind of what we're doing here. There's a whole community of guests that are helping us as we are talking about this really sensitive, very heavy and difficult topic so that we can all wrestle through this together.

JP: I've been thankful for the pastoral heart that our panelists have shown as they've been addressing this, they're talking about these things with empathy and with care for the people who are walking through these sorts of situations. At the same time, they're making some strong and clear statements about the need to separate somebody in a place like this from the source of danger or abuse and get them to a place of safety first and foremost, before we start talking about some of the more complex theological issues around these things.

I feel in my spirit as we listen a desire to just kind of get out of the way and allow these people who have a variety of experiences, who have deep wisdom, who have years of ministry experience to just speak about these things. I found it so edifying, so far, to listen.

I'm also looking forward to our chance to walk through a conversation with Many Rooms Church where we have many people who have experienced brokenness and relationship in a variety of different ways and hearing about lived experience and how it plays out in real life.

When I sat down with Many Rooms Church in the North End of Winnipeg, I was at a table there with Stephanie, Travis, Jennifer and Deborah. And when this conversation came up, we had a bit of an extended conversation that went back and forth about how this plays out in real life. There are many stories and experiences that were shared, and so this is a bit of a longer than normal segment, but we wanted to let it play as uninterrupted as possible to sort of put you there in the dining room with us as we talked about these things. We're going to start here with Deborah, who talks a bit about her own difficult story.

Deborah: Well, it certainly takes effort to be loving. I was abused as a child. I learned that I don't want to be like that, that I don't want to be violent or cruel or anything like that, even though it happened to me. I want to change that and loving people is a work. It takes effort. It takes thinking about how you treat others.

Stephanie: It's complicated because even if you are being kind to your enemy, are you sure you love them? Because maybe you're doing it to make them feel bad. Or maybe you're actually not loving them at all, but are trying to get revenge in some obscure way. And then, perhaps not having any communication with someone, could actually be loving if they're actually not safe to be around. It does feel like loving your enemy is so specific, you have to cater it to each specific circumstance and maybe it feels like it involves a lot of looking into your heart and seeing if you can see anything that looks like love there.

I haven't had terrible situations in my life, and yet I've had many situations that have been very difficult to forgive someone and not to feel like they are an enemy. And what I've noticed I have to do is forgive many times.

There was a lady who refused to pay us for some work we did and was really abusive in the process verbally to me, and I have to walk by her house to go to the office every day. I noticed for a couple of years that it was very hard to walk by without ruminating on how unjust this was and to feel angry. I'm actually thankful I had to walk by her house because every single time I could recognize that I'm not feeling any love here at all, I'm wishing I could say this and wishing I'd done that and so to then lift that up again to God and say I want to forgive. I don't think I have.

This story for me has just recently been redemptive in that she called, and I was able to talk to her without feeling triggered and actually feeling loving and compassionate towards her which blew me away because I wasn't able to get there on my own. But it felt like through many times of asking God to make me even willing, he did something.

Jennifer: I've personally thought more about how complex it can be to love our neighbour more than just loving enemies, but I think there's a connection in it. We have realized in different ways that loving our neighbour may not feel like love to another neighbour. Loving one neighbour doesn't always feel like love to another neighbour.

So, for example, some neighbours and friends of ours are local business owners and are adversely affected by meth users and addicts in our neighbourhood. And other neighbours are the people that are stuck in those addictions and struggle and if I put my energy toward loving my neighbour, who's a businesswoman or a businessman, then I'm likely to maybe try to like immediately relocate the problem people, the addicts and the people that are harmful to those businesses.

But if I put my energy toward loving the addict, then I might seek to meet their immediate and pressing needs for food and housing and pray for the healing of their destructive patterns and stuff. But in the end, my love of one neighbour may make an enemy of the other neighbour because they're different responses to different neighbours and the different struggles that they have. And so I think that we find ourselves perplexed sometimes by that complexity of loving one neighbour or making an enemy out of another one, or how to respond. And I feel like we've been unable to do that perfectly. And we do that imperfectly on a regular basis and we know that Jesus seemed to have done it in some really radical ways, but it wasn't simple for him either, because it didn't make everybody happy all the time, how he loved it. So anyway, I think that's something that we were just grappling with, the complexity of that.

Travis: I have an example of exactly of that. Our office has little alcoves in the front door which are great little getaways from the rain and from the weather just to get off the sidewalk, especially for people who are living on the streets or prostitutes or whoever; people wanting to have a little place to shoot up some drugs or whatever. There's bad things that can happen in those little alcoves, and sometimes the community says, well, isn't it great that there's these little places that people can zip into.

The residents of that apartment block on the second and third floor do not like to open the door and have these people, and they often try to get into the building as well too. And so it's a danger to them. And so as a property owner, we're trying to accommodate. Okay, well, we want the safety of our tenants to be – that's important, we need to do something about it. So we've put grate on the front step, like, that's uncomfortable to sit on and even put some leg bolts on there just so that it's a little less comfortable and we've heard people in the community saying, “can you believe that some business owners are making them comfortable on their front steps for people to sit down on?” So there's that tension between, okay the tenants really want to have security and safety of the building and yet there is this need for our neighbours to have a little place to go.

Jennifer: Our whole city has had that dilemma with bus shelters, and loving one person is not loving another person and it's complicated. We have that with pigeons in our neighbourhood. It's great to have pigeons and it's great to have birds in the neighbourhood until they're pooping in your own yard and on your own things. And then you want to put those spikes on your roof to make sure that they don't roost there. Which one is love?

Stephanie: It makes me think too that as humans we seem to be pretty quick to choose enemies, like decide a side on something and say, well, this is good or this is the victim or the innocent party and I wonder if that is one of these things in terms of how do we love enemies, is inviting God to give us a more complex perspective. Again not having been someone who faced serious abuse I don't know whether this applies, but it does appear that healing involves actually starting to understand the abuser and recognize that perhaps they're not the enemy, they are also a wounded person, and somehow that it actually can help to know that this person isn't necessarily an enemy. Maybe in many other situations, just to recognize I usually have a choice of whether someone is my enemy. And so I should do that less.

Deborah: There's certainly a difference between being peaceful and being a doormat. God still wants you to... Your body is his temple. So if someone else is damaging that, it's damaging your spirituality as well. Yes, definitely get out of bad situations. You don't necessarily have to hate them, but you can leave that situation and grow, learn. That's exactly what happened after I left the JW's I learned. I came here and I met Stephanie and Travis and my thinking began to change about religion and everything else. It took effort and yes, you still have to get out of bad situations. You can't be a doormat.

Stephanie: And that's one of the interesting things about Jesus. I think he intentionally showed us that he was not dragged to his death. We didn't get to see angels come and save them, so I guess we can't prove that he could have saved himself. But he says he could have and he intentionally chose this path of suffering. And that's very different than telling someone to stay in a situation that is not saving the world. So it is complicated to apply Jesus' example. He had a purpose for that suffering.

Deborah: I guess sometimes when it's not under our control, we're going to suffer because we are peacekeepers, but where it's under our control we do our best to be loving, yet you know, make that space between you and the abuser. It's not worth it.

Stephanie: One of the things I have seen is that once people seek healing for abuses that they've experienced, or the pain, forgiveness tends to be easy because there's no more pain. And so I wonder when the question is how do you love someone in a difficult situation, well you seek your own healing, you seek God for healing, because once you are healed, you are actually... You move away from the situation and thus you actually free your enemy because your enemy was indebted to you because you're wounded. So there's something very powerful in just simply breaking the cycle of violence and coming to the point where what that person did to you doesn't define you and it doesn't control your behaviour, that you are now free from that and are able to be controlled by God, so maybe it isn't always a direct interaction with your enemy that is showing love.

JP: We're in some ways we're drifting into that second part of the question there, but I'll just ask it outright and if you've got anything more to add on it, then you're welcome to. What is the really hard part about loving our enemies? There are things about loving our enemies that just don't make sense, right? It's with people who disagree with us, poke holes and some of those holes are legitimate, right? There are things that that from a logical perspective or from a power in terms of how do you how do you climb the ladder perspective, it's an impractical way to live and you can invent of course, the classic sort of gun man comes into your house, what are you going to do scenarios where this falls apart in some ways. What are the real stumbling blocks or real difficulties around this idea of loving our neighbours and how do we face those?

In our everyday life, what is the hardest part of loving our enemies?

Stephanie: It doesn't work always. It's a very vulnerable thing to try to love someone who could hurt you, and sometimes you just get hurt more.

Travis: So one of the most difficult things I think I have in a situation when someone is about to harm someone else is actually making an decision for them, like what is the best thing for this? What's the most loving thing at this moment? It's not always evident. And so for me, that's difficult to discern and to say how do I, as Jesus would, interact or engage in this situation or remove myself from this situation and I think for me that's personally the challenge. To know when, when, to, when and how to engage lovingly in a nonviolent way.

Stephanie: And we can be wrong as Mennonites, I think Mennonites are sometimes criticized about being conflict avoiders and thinking that to be nonviolent they shouldn't address conflict. But Jesus was very direct in preaching for repentance. He said what was what was right and wrong. He even in one scenario told his disciples if you're not

accepted, shake the dust from your feet and leave. He didn't model just being the quiet in the land. So part of loving your enemies, the complexity of what's hard, is knowing when you're called to be defenseless and not defend yourself because that's what Jesus modelled, and when you're called to preach for repentance, and maybe we get enemies, when we get that wrong sometimes too.

KW: Now we're coming back to our conversation with Betty Pries. We asked Betty, what is the hardest part about loving our enemies that's for all of us to do, no matter our context if we want to be faithful to Jesus?

BP: I would say that the hardest part of loving our enemies if we want to be faithful... I don't know if I can say what the hardest part is. I think there are many hard parts, but one of the hard parts of loving our enemies is loving the enemy within; our self doubt and our self hatred. If we could love ourselves deeply, and I'm not talking about ego-love, like I'm better than everybody else, I'm just talking about loving myself, as the person that God has created me to be. If we could do that, we wouldn't need to get defensive all the time. If we could do that, we wouldn't need to externalize our self hatred and put it onto somebody else. If we could deeply love ourselves, we could more easily love the people around us, because we would see their brokenness. We all know that we're broken. If we're honest with ourselves, we know that we're broken. I know that I'm broken. I know that people around me are broken. But if I could love myself, my brokenness, then when I encounter other people and their brokenness, I don't need to be so judgmental about it. I can encounter their brokenness through a sense of compassion and love. Who there they are. They're struggling to, just like I am, to love myself. And for them to love themselves. And so I would say that's one hard part of loving our enemies.

The other hard part of loving our enemies, I suppose, is that the society around us, and that includes the society in our churches, really looks for ways to justify hatred. If you're wanting to find somebody to listen to you, to really shore up your perspective that you're right and they're wrong, it will not be hard to find people to support you in that perspective. It's so tempting and so easy to find voices that will say, "oh yeah, she's a jerk. You don't wanna listen to her." Or "that person's awful. You don't want to have a friendship with that person," or "that person is..." and you can fill in the blanks. It's a spiritual commitment to resist the temptation to only listen to those who affirm our perspective, that we're right and they're wrong. It's a spiritual commitment to not listen to only those who think that we're right and they're wrong. It's a spiritual commitment to say I am choosing to see the image of God in this person, even when I feel like this person has not behaved to me according to the likeness of God.

JP: We asked Pastor Brian Zahnd this same question, stepping away from specific experiences of abuse or violence and into everyday life in the office, in the church and community. What is the hardest part about loving our enemies, and how do we go about doing this?

BZ: Sometimes I like to say an enemy is a person whose story you don't know. And once we actually began to hear other people's story, or can even begin to inhabit some of their experience or perception, we understand often that this kind of enemy isn't really even an enemy at all. They're just someone who's dealing with their own issues, perceives things differently, and I think it becomes easier to forgive. It's when we cast people in the role of a two-dimensional villain that's so unhelpful. We need to we need to hear their story, understand them as a human being. Understand that quite possibly there have been others who have viewed us in a similar fashion and understand that we really didn't intend to visit harm upon them or bring them sorrow and pain. But these things inevitably happen.

And so we're continually trying to place others ahead of ourselves and to be more sympathetic to their well-being. We understand that we're all in this together and life is difficult and there's a lot of pain and we need to bear one another's burdens. And if someone is lashing out at me in a particular moment, I probably just need to understand some of their story and be sympathy. I would say something like that.

KW: This is Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler.

MFB: I've mean the whole thing seems hard. Jesus seems to say as much. People don't want to do this. As soon as he starts talking about this, people are just running for the hills. When it feels hard I just say, "yeah, it is because it is hard." But what I don't think needs to be hard about this is that we have to feel a sense that loving our enemies is something like emotional manipulation. It doesn't have to be hard in that way. I really appreciate that at no point does Jesus ever say, "oh, you actually have to, like, feel really good about doing this." Or, you know, "you have to just think positive thoughts about the person who has done harm to you." And instead we have this Jesus who continues to pray psalms of imprecations, psalms of justice in his own prayer life. The zeal of the Lord is upon me.

Jesus also has the space to recognize and name to God the fullness of this anger, this burning righteousness and then to turn it over to God's righteous judgment. There's space for all of that in loving our enemies and so I think the hardness of this has more to do with the hardness of what it means to build this new world. That's the part that feels like it should be hard. The part that doesn't need to feel hard is telling people who've experienced harm that they have to feel a particular way. That's something that we need to resist.

JP: This has been a heavy episode. There's a lot that we've walked through today. I've been grateful for the experts who are willing to sort of sensitively walk through these difficult topics. I've been grateful for the stories that we've heard about people's lived experience with trying to figure out how to live out loving our enemies when we've been hurt. Or are

in situations where people are antagonistic towards us or have become our enemies for one reason or another.

KW: And if you are anything like Jesse or myself you've probably got a lot of thoughts racing through your mind and a lot of feelings going on in your heart. So we're going to keep our discussion to a minimum at the end of this episode today, and we're going to leave you with a song by Dane Joneshill, which is his response to some of these heavy kind of topics. And it's his song called *If I Could*.

If I Could, Dane Joneshill

If I could I'd take your memories
that hide behind your eyes, like a kind-hearted thief.
I'd pack 'em up and take 'em with me.
You'd never even know that I was there,

And when you lay your head down,
brace yourself for devils to dance there in the dark.
You'd be surprised when sleep finds you
and the monster that you wait for never comes.

Where have you been?
Oh, and what have you seen?

I know it's not what you've done but what's been done to you.
Fingers trace the edges of your bruises.
I could read your scars like a blind man reads braille,
I would change your story, I'd change your story.

If I could,
I would hold you.
Like a Father, not a lover,
I would hold you.
And you'd be like a child
Who knows the monster's never coming back.

Where have you been?
Oh, and what have you seen?

I know it's not what you've done but what's been done to you.
Fingers trace the edges of your bruises.
I could read your scars like a blind man reads braille,
I would change your story, I'd change your story.

Hasn't anybody told you?
Hasn't anybody told you?
Hasn't anybody told you you're innocent?
You're innocent.

I know it's not what you've done but what's been done to you.
Fingers trace the edges of your bruises.
I could read your scars like a blind man reads braille,
I would change your story, I'd change your story.

Closing

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

You could check us out online at 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, Pastor Brian Zahnd and Stephanie, Travis, Jennifer and Deborah from the Many Rooms Church Community, which is a network of house churches in Winnipeg's North End.

Our intro song is First Communion by Dane Joneshill and our feature song today was *If I Could* by Dane Joneshill.

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 the notion that for all of our talk about loving our enemies, Jesus assumed or presupposed that we would be having enemies in the first place, and we will be discussing what the implications are of that fact on our lives. Join us next time for that on The Armchair Anabaptist.

*Edited for clarity.