



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, *Associate Rector for Formation & Liturgy*

Frenemies

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 30, 2020

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Jeremiah 15:15-21; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Let us pray.

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

Earlier this summer, I had the opportunity to spend two weeks with my sister at a house in upstate New York. We both worked during the day, chattering away on our Zoom calls in separate corners of the house. But after I finished Night Prayer at 9 PM, we gathered together in front of the living room TV. As we decompressed from our days, checking our email and social media feeds, we took turns determining what we would watch. Our first night in the house we agreed on *Hamilton*, which had recently been released. On future nights, I selected intellectually stimulating and critically acclaimed films like *Crip Camp*, a documentary about a summer camp for children with disabilities, and *Private Life*, an independent drama starring Paul Giamatti about a middle-aged couple trying to conceive. When it came time for my sister to choose, she exhibited decidedly more pedestrian taste: she picked a reality show called *Love Island*.

At first, I scoffed at the show's attempt to combine *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and *The Bachelor* into one voyeuristic spectacle in which contestants date one another in order to avoid being dumped from a luxury villa in southern Spain. My little sister might squander her time on this trash, I thought, but I am above this. I am a sophisticated, enlightened man of God. I don't watch reality TV. What is this, 2003? Before long, though, I was hooked. When I took some time off of work at the beginning of August, I didn't turn to the stack of religious books I had ordered from Amazon nor did I spend hours a day in silent meditation. I watched *Love Island*.

By situating romance within the context of a competition, *Love Island* highlights just how fickle human relationships can be. I was captivated by how quickly contestants, also called islanders, could move from meeting one another for the first time to declaring undying love for one another to renouncing that love altogether to declaring that love all over again. They fight at lunch time and say they couldn't be happier at dinner. By breakfast, they're fighting again. Newcomers enter the villa and disrupt relationships that earlier seemed destined for the altar rail. An islander tells another that she is the only one for him and then 24 hours later is kissing someone else. Such instability is not limited to romantic relationships, however. More informal, platonic relationships also shift rapidly within the villa. "Best mates" turn against one another when a romantic interest gets in the way. An islander begins to disapprove of her closest friend's antics and starts badmouthing her to others. In the second season, a woman named Kady initially

¹ "For our Enemies." *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 816.

shouts a four-letter expletive at late arrival Tina when Tina steals her man for a date, but several days later Kady and Tina are calling one another best of friends, and a few days after that Kady is in tears because Tina has to leave.

It's easy to smugly dismiss the genre of reality television and the fame-hungry characters who populate it. I certainly did. After decades of reality programming clogging our airwaves, we know full well that the premises of these shows are contrived, that the dialogue they contain is often scripted, and that the footage they feature has been manipulated by clever producers. But after watching more hours of *Love Island* than I care to admit, I wonder if our own behavior is truly all that different from what we see on our screens. Perhaps our eagerness to distance ourselves from reality TV actually reflects our fear that the stories these shows are telling about glamorous pseudo-celebrities might also be true about us.

Think, for a moment, about the romantic and platonic relationships you have experienced in your life. Has everything always turned out the way you expected? Have feelings and connections lasted as long as you thought they would? Or have things changed, sometimes in sudden, unpredictable ways? Perhaps *Love Island* and its sibling reality shows, for all their exaggerations and absurdities, shed valuable light on how volatile and strange human relationships ultimately can be.

“Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus barks at Peter after Peter suggests that Jesus can't possibly suffer and die. What's remarkable about Jesus' retort is not the fact that he scolds Peter, but the vehemence with which he does so. Only five verses before this moment, Jesus tells Peter that he is the rock on which the Christian Church will be built. With a flourish of fanfare, Jesus anoints Peter to continue his mission on earth—to be the foundation of the institution that would bear his stamp of approval and his name. Jesus arguably makes Peter the most important person in his life. And then, just a few breaths later, Jesus calls Peter Satan—a name he never uses for Judas, the disciple who betrays him; for Pontius Pilate, under whose authority he is crucified; for the religious leaders, who constantly spar against him; or even for the demons he casts out of the sick. The only other entity Jesus calls Satan is the devil himself.

By naming Peter Satan, however flippantly, Jesus labels Peter as one of his greatest adversaries, not only chiding Peter for his refusal to accept the inevitability of his Savior's suffering but also foreshadowing the multiple instances in which Peter will deny ever knowing that same Savior. From their first meeting by the Sea of Galilee to their confrontation at Caesarea Philippi to the final night of Jesus' life and a post-resurrection encounter on the seashore, Jesus and Peter behave like the most dramatic cast members of a salacious reality show: they fight and make up; they utter gushy declarations of devotion and then question if any of it is really true; they receive and issue rejections and then get back together again. Deep affection and intense friction coexist in their relationship. Jesus and Peter are frenemies.

“It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry,” American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote, “whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom. Each, in its utmost development, supposes a high degree of intimacy and heart-knowledge; each renders one individual dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another; each leaves the passionate lover, or the no less passionate hater, forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his object. Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions seem essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and lurid glow.”² In characteristically erudite prose, Hawthorne articulates a truth that underlies the tumultuous romances of reality TV as well as the tumultuous relationship that Jesus and Peter share: the line between affection and animosity can be awfully thin.

We human beings know far less about ourselves and our connections with other people than we might like to assume. Our relationships with each other are, as the writer Janet Malcolm describes them, “a

² Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Penguin Classics), 242.

messy jangle of misapprehensions, at best an uneasy truce between powerful solitary fantasy systems.”³ We have our suspicions, yes, but we can’t look into the minds of others and know for sure what they think about us, nor can we predict how they will behave towards us in the future: the individual we most trust right now might eventually betray us; the person we vehemently dislike at the moment might someday show us kindness beyond compare. Meanwhile, we find it tricky to decipher the complex streams of emotion that swirl inside our hearts. We ask ourselves if the strong feeling we are currently experiencing is passion or anger, jealousy or admiration, disgust or desire. Sometimes the answer is “all of the above.”

When Paul told the Romans to feed their enemies in order to heap burning coals upon their heads, maybe he was trying to tell them that love and hate are not mutually exclusive emotions, that you can wish someone ill and good simultaneously, that the same person can be your enemy and your friend. Jesus was able to love Peter in spite of the ire that arose in him whenever Peter tried to tell him what to do and regardless of the knowledge Jesus had that Peter would one day deny him three times. If Jesus could love the one he called Satan, surely we can love those who perturb and disturb and challenge us. If Jesus could hold in tension his positive and negative emotions, surely we can aspire to do the same.

Thankfully, when we are presented with the choice between love and hate, we don’t have to make a decision. We can dislike someone and still treat them well. We can love someone and still argue against their perspective. We can adore someone and still go our separate ways. And as we navigate the whole strange constellation of the conflicting emotions we feel, we can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that Jesus, too, had mixed feelings; that Jesus, too, had a frenemy—and that their turbulent bromance, for all of the ups and downs, break-ups and make-ups, doubts and denials it involved, still managed to give birth to a movement that changed the world.

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

³ Janet Malcolm, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*, 6.