



“The Radical Love of Jesus”
Scripture – Matthew 5:38-48
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 19, 2017

Be perfect as God is perfect. Everyone who is perfect, please stand. I can see a couple of people glaring at their spouses with that look that says: Don’t even think about it!

Not only, “Be perfect,” but Jesus also says, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, let them hit you on the left as well” and “Love not only your neighbor, but also your enemy.” This is one of those texts that begs us to skip over it.

Perhaps if we wrestle with the passage, we might be able to squeeze something worthwhile out of it.

To grasp what Jesus intends in our text for today, we must see it in context. In the Gospel of Matthew, three full chapters are devoted to the familiar section known as the Sermon on the Mount. The author pulls back from describing *episodes* in the life of Jesus – such as healing the ill, arguing with opponents, performing miracles – and instead presents us with some of the *teachings* of Jesus.

The sermon begins with the Beatitudes, a series of blessings, some of which run counter to both cultural assumptions and common logic. Instead of saying, “Blessed are those who have reason to celebrate,” he says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” Instead of “Blessed are those who are bold,” he says, “Blessed are those who are meek.” Instead of “Blessed are those who are successful,” he says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for a righteous cause.” Jesus undoubtedly seized their attention by countering commonly held conventions.

Today’s text falls in the same chapter with the Beatitudes. They are the last two in a string of six provocative teachings. We might label these six as *antithesis teachings* that are impossible to fulfill.

The basic formula for each of the six teachings is: “You have heard it said, ‘X,’ but I say to you, ‘Y.’” The first one is “You have heard it said to those in ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.’”

All who have never been angry at someone please raise your hand. Precisely.

That is the first of these six sayings, and our passage contains the last two – “Do not seek revenge, but turn the other cheek” and “Love your enemies.” Then, Jesus ties up all six in a tidy package when he says, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

If you want to win people to your side, you set the bar low. You do not set it so high that no one can clear it. However, Jesus did not say, “Do the best you can.” Not even: “Be all that you can be.” Nope, Jesus said, “Be perfect.”

When Jesus referred to the Old Testament law that called for “an eye for an eye,” he was pointing to a law that sought to limit vengeance. Harm usually provokes escalating levels of harm. If you strike me with a club, I’ll stab you with a knife. If you steal one of my sheep, I’ll steal ten of yours. Recognition of this human propensity to spiral into more severe acts of retaliation, the law prescribing “an eye for an eye” sought to limit the violence by commanding that it could only be proportional. It is not acceptable to kill for an eye. It is not acceptable to take two eyes for an eye. You are limited to “an eye for an eye.”

The Hebrew people followed this law for centuries, but by the time of Jesus, a number of rabbis had moderated “an eye for an eye” by teaching that “injuries should be compensated financially rather than physically.”¹ That was surely advancement. It was more humane.

However, Jesus wanted people to go even further. He challenged people to totally rethink how best to respond to evil. And for those gathered at his feet, this was no abstract teaching. It had everyday, real-world application.

Jesus was speaking to first century Jews living under the harsh Roman occupation. Living under a power that has no respect for your religion and seizes opportunities to humiliate if not physically harm you, becomes increasingly difficult to bear. The anger within mounts to the point that it begs to explode in violence. Today’s news reports similar situations in Middle East countries.

You may have heard of the Zealots. They were a Jewish party at the time of Jesus that advocated a violent uprising against the Romans, despite the fact that it would have been suicide.

Jesus knew that violence begets greater violence. He wanted his followers to resist the occupiers, but not with the same brutal tactics as their oppressors. He counseled a different response.

Our text says, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye’...but I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer.’” The NRSV of the Bible misinterprets the Greek verb. Biblical scholars have shown that it should not read “Do not resist,” but rather, “Do not *violently* resist.”²

Further, it would make no sense for Jesus to say “Do not resist evil.” He constantly called people to reject evil and turn what is right and true and good. At the beginning of his ministry, he went into the wilderness for forty days where he overcame temptations by resisting evil. Jesus does not call on his followers to step aside and let evil win the day. He is calling for resistance without violence.

Jesus immediately provides examples. He says, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” A slap on the right cheek is a backhanded slap. It is what someone with greater power does to someone with lesser power. It is what a master did to a slave. It is what a Roman soldier did to a Jew. It was intended to command subservience. It was intended to humiliate.

Jesus counsels defiance. He says “If you are struck on the right cheek, turn the other cheek to him as well.” Do not retaliate physically, but take a courageous posture that says, “Your blows do not humiliate me. I am not subservient. You cannot force me to comply. I refuse to cooperate.” The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. patterned his non-violent resistance on this teaching of Jesus.

Jesus gives another example. “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” Anyone who was taken to court and sued for his coat was already very poor. It was most likely a peasant farmer who could

not repay his loan. His creditor is taking his coat, and next he will take his land. Jesus says, “If someone sues you for your coat – that is your outer garment – give him your cloak, that is your under garment, as well.

Jesus says, “Hand your clothes to the creditor and stand naked in court. New Testament scholar, Warren Carter reveals why Jesus would counsel such action. “This gesture represents the stripping away of land and property by the creditor. By standing naked before one’s creditor who has both garments in his hand, one shames the creditor and exposes the greed and the unjust system the creditor represents... [This nonviolent action] unmasks the powerful one as heartless and inhumane.”²

Jesus has another piece of advice for non-violent resistance. He says, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Roman soldiers could compel a person to carry his pack a mile for him. It was another way of reminding the Jews that they were subservient. Jesus says, “Carry the pack a mile for him. But don’t stop there. Keep going. Carry it a second mile.” Again, it is a strategy for refusing to be humiliated. It “refuses to play the game on Rome’s terms. Instead of feeling superior, the soldier is put off guard.

Further, any soldier who abused a subject could be punished. Would the subject file a complaint against the soldier? The person carrying the pack has seized the initiative and caused the oppressor to become anxious.”³ Jesus was not commanding acquiescence; he was laying the groundwork for non-violent rebellion.

Jesus follows with his final antithesis teaching. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Most of us generally follow conventional wisdom. We love those who love us. We do not love our enemies. That is why they are our enemies!

But the kind of love Jesus calls on us to exude is radical. It loves even those who commit injustice. It resists injustice and evil, but does not wish evil on the perpetrator. You may remember being taught as a child: “Hate the sin, but love the sinner.” The radical love of Jesus prays not for the demise of the enemy, but for the transformation of the enemy.

It is an extreme love beyond what most can muster. But it stands as a goal and is surely what Jesus is pointing to when he calls on us to be perfect. Perhaps this provides a glimpse of the kind of love Jesus challenges us to express.

When Nelson Mandela was in prison, he did not hate his jailers. He treated them with dignity. He seemed to realize that they were captive of an evil from which they needed to be freed. It was the same with those who had supported apartheid and orchestrated his 27 years of imprisonment. Rather than doing what most of us would do – label them as enemy, seethe with anger, and dream of destroying them – Mandela was able to look beyond their treatment of him and envision their transformation.

John Carlin, author of his biography wrote, “Mandela succeeded because he chose to see good in people who ninety-nine percent of us would have judged to be beyond redemption...Instead of eliminating the enemy and starting from zero, the enemy was incorporated into a new order deliberately built on the foundations of the old. Conceiving of his revolution not primarily as the destruction of apartheid, but as the unification and reconciliation of all South Africans, Mandela broke the historical mold.”⁴

Perhaps in these divisive days, we need to remember that those whose ideas are so contrary to our own are God’s children as much as we are. And perhaps love – the radical love of Jesus – can show us a way forward.

NOTES

1. Karen C. Sapio, “Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), p.111.
2. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p.152.
3. *Ibid.*, p.153.
4. Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, for February 19, 2017.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Ever-Present Go, who draws near to us through water and Word, story and song — We give thanks that you became known to us in the person of Jesus Christ — the one who taught us the way that leads to life and paved that path with grace.

You summon us to follow, but the road is not always easy ... Many voices beckon us to choose comfort over compassion, greed over generosity, and resentment over reconciliation. Open our ears, O God, to hear you calling above the din of dissonant voices. By your Word and Spirit, nurture our faith and inspire our faithfulness that we may do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with you.

Holy One, You teach us to pray for *all* people ... the righteous and the *unrighteous*, the kind and the *unkind*, the lovable and the *unlovable*.

As we so often do, we lift before you those for whom it is *easy* to pray:

- Our families and friends, and all we hold dear ...
- The sick, the suffering, the grieving, the hungry ...
- Those weighed down by injustice, or caught in war-torn lands ...

We lift before you those who are *different* from us:

- Sisters and brothers of other lands or creeds ...
- Those with whom we share little in common, with whom we often disagree ...
- All whose life experiences are hard to fathom, and whose stories we don't understand ...

Most of all, we pray for those we would prefer to forget:

- Those who have harmed us in body, mind, or spirit ...
- Those whom we fear, or who embody that which we despise ...
- Those we deem unworthy of *your* mercy and of *our* compassion ...

God of Grace, Lord of Love, You have called us to be instruments of justice and peace. Work in and through us, so that our prayers give way to action, and our actions carve out a path toward transformation. Stretch our hearts to love with your love until fractures heal and wounds mend, and all creation experiences your wholeness.

We pray in the name of Christ, and with one voice offer the prayer he taught us ... **“Our Father ...”**