

February 19, 2017
7th Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 5:38-48
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In today's gospel, we hear a part of the Sermon on the Mount to which we usually have one of two reactions. The first response is a rather ho-hum one – “Yes, *we know this passage*”. We've heard Jesus' commands so often that our minds and hearts have become dull and those phrases no longer grab our attention or startle us – “turn the other cheek”, “love your enemies”, “pray for those who hurt you”. We don't think too much about actually trying to follow these commands.

The second response takes Jesus' words more seriously, but also assumes they are out of reach. “Turn the other cheek.” *Are you kidding?! And get treated like a doormat?* “Love your enemies.” *You can't be serious!* These teachings seem from our perspective to be sheer folly, idealistic sentiments that are crazy and would be impossible to apply in the “real” world.

But Jesus isn't kidding and is dead serious about these commands. In this part of his teaching, Jesus is not dismissing the law of his Jewish faith tradition – “an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth”. That law was meant to put a limit on retribution. But Jesus raises higher the bar of right action and right relationship. Jesus is describing what it means to be a disciple who is consciously aware of living in the kingdom of God present right now, and being one who sees the world the way God sees it, imagines it the way God imagines it.

It's certainly clear that turning the other cheek and returning hatred with love is no way to get ahead in this world. For the rules of *this* kingdom – and its Domination system – reflects a kingdom in which it's a dog-eat-dog world where only the strong survive. *But that's just the point.* Jesus isn't trying to modify the rules of this world and its domination system. He's not inviting us to figure out how to make the most of this world for ourselves, and he's not even inviting us to find a safe port amid the storms of this world. He is starting a revolution by calling the rules of this world into question, and at the very same time, redeeming this world that he loves and that will, in due time, put him to death.

Jesus calls the powers of the day into question by describing an entirely different way to relate to each other, inviting us into relationships governed not by power but by vulnerability grounded in love. “ ‘An eye for an eye’ makes all people blind”, Gandhi would say almost two thousand years later. Here Jesus invites us to overcome the urge

toward retribution by adopting a different way, a “third way”, if you will. Not passively submitting in humiliation and fear, and not retaliating with violence – but actively using resistance without violence through the power of the Holy Spirit, that is soul force. Truly this is God’s way to freedom. For the oppressed this way leads to freedom from evil. For the oppressor, this way leads to freedom from sin.

I recall being so stunned, when shortly after the shootings at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in South Carolina in June 2015 – some of the family members of those victims, said that they forgave the shooter, Dylan Roof for what he had done. My first response was “*Are these people for real? How in the world can they say that – how can they do that?!*” In my very visceral response I caught a glimpse of my own inner capacity for retaliation, that instinctive desire to hit back and hurt the one who has hurt us, the twisted pleasure and sense of power that comes with holding a grudge. I was pretty certain that if I was in their situation, I would not have been forgiving at that point, if ever at all.

It was reported before the sentencing phase for Dylan Roof that the families of the victims hoped the sentence to be delivered for these crimes would be life imprisonment without parole. They did not want the jury to give Dylan Roof the death penalty. But the jury did come back with a decision for punishment by death. Clearly this is an example of the clash of two very different kingdoms.

Jesus isn’t satisfied with merely overturning this world. The very essence of Jesus’ critique – that we were created not merely for justice but also for love and life – is at the same time the only possible hope for those enmeshed in the orders of the world. And that would be all of us. History has shown it. We have seen it. Strength eventually fails. Power corrupts. And survival of the fittest leaves so many casualties on the ground. Love alone transforms, redeems, and creates new life. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a student of both Jesus and Gandhi, once said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

What Jesus proposes is a deeper and more radical, transformative way of following that will look foolish and odd to the world. And it is a hard way. G.K. Chesterton once said about the Christian faith: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.”

With the final sentence of today’s gospel passage, in a teaching that is already tough to hear, this portion is capped off with the words: “Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It sounds like yet one more unattainable command. But this line

sheds a different light on the whole passage, and offers hope in trying to follow such difficult commands.

The word “*telos*”, the Greek word Jesus uses can be translated “perfect”, but it typically describes something not so much morally perfect as it does something that has grown up, matured and now reached its perfect end. That is, *telos* is the goal or desired outcome of a thing.

So in that command to be perfect as God is perfect, could it actually be that Jesus is calling us to more, because God loves us too much to leave us in the place God finds us? Could it be that Jesus knows we have more to give, that we can be and do more than we have settled for, and that we can absolutely make a difference in the world? These impossible commands are Jesus’ invitation to become the people God has created us to be. And who else but Jesus could offer such an invitation, because surely he knows and has experienced how hard it is for us to love rather than hate, to forgive rather than begrudge, to heal rather than wound, especially when we ourselves walk so much of our lives wounded and hurt.

So here is an invitation to a way we can move a step closer toward more abundant and holy life: Take a few moments and identify what is one thing that is holding you back from living into your God-given identity. One thing – one fear, one memory, one hurt, one resentment that keeps you from embracing and becoming the person God wants you to be. In just a few moments at the conclusion of the sermon and before the creed, take a few moments to write that one thing on the pink slip of paper found in your bulletin, and when the offering plate is passed, put your slip of paper in the plate. Our challenges as well as our gifts will be brought to God’s altar. We will be giving God not only some of our treasure but also some of our tragedy, trusting God to receive and redeem both. The slips of paper put in the offering plates will not be read, but will be burned after the service.

So as we come to the table today, recall what St. Augustine said to his congregants while presiding at the Eucharist: “Receive who you are. Become what you have received.” We are God’s beloved children. Let us go and be who we are. Amen.

**Attribution for much of this sermon content is given to preaching commentary columns on this passage by Dr. David Lose in “Dear Working Preacher”, 2011 & 2014.*