

Epiphany 7A 2017 Sermon¹

Matthew 5:38-48

New Revised Standard Version:

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“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 he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The MESSAGE translation:

³⁸ "Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. ⁴⁰ If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. ⁴¹ And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. ⁴² No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously. ⁴³ "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, ⁴⁵ for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. ⁴⁶ If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. ⁴⁷ If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. ⁴⁸ "In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

“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.”

So let me ask you: What is your reaction to these teachings of Jesus? Do you follow them in your own life? Do you turn the other cheek? Give to everyone who begs from you? Love your enemies? Pray for those who persecute you?

If you think about it, this passage in today's Gospel – about non-retaliation and loving one's enemies – may be at the same time the most important teaching in the Bible for us today – *and* the most ignored. I suspect that you and I are not that different from the 10-year-old girl who left a voicemail for her father, who is a pastor. (This is a true story!) In the voicemail, she said: "Dad, I'm the lector at church Sunday, and I have that passage where Jesus says, 'Turn the other cheek.' You know that passage, right? Do the other Gospels have that same passage? Is it different in the other Gospels? Could you let me know, because ... no offense, Dad, but I think Jesus is wrong." ¹

Raise your hand if that thought has ever entered your mind. "Turn the other cheek? Love my enemies? Pray for those who persecute me and my country? When pigs fly!"

And we're not alone. Critics from the extreme right **and** left have often characterized Jesus' teaching as ludicrous. Consider Russian-American novelist and political philosopher Ayn [ine] Rand, who greatly influenced libertarians and conservatives in this country. She wrote, "If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men *have* to reject." And then there's Karl Marx, father of communism, who said, "The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness." ¹

So there you have it: If our civilization is to survive, the teachings of Jesus – especially those concerning altruism, submission, and humility – *must* be thrown overboard.

But there was a **non**-Christian in the 20th Century who took this Gospel passage *very* seriously. In fact, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which he said "went straight to his heart," shaped this man's very mission in life. We know his name today *because* he followed this teaching of Jesus, even though he was a Hindu. His name was Mahatma Gandhi. Of course, Gandhi's life and teaching of non-retaliation and love for enemies ended up getting him killed, as it did Gandhi's student Martin Luther King, Jr., and of course, Jesus. We don't like to even hear about non-retaliation and loving our enemies, so we get rid of those who preach it and live it.

But Jesus did not come to save the existing civilization, either in the form of the Roman Empire of his day or in the Western civilization of our day. Rather, he came to reveal and grow a new kingdom – the kingdom of heaven. In fact, one of the major themes of the Gospel of Matthew is the clash of kingdoms – the kingdom of this world vs. the kingdom of heaven. Matthew could not have made that clearer than in the scene he paints at the very beginning of his Gospel, where

the Wise Men come to Herod the King and ask, “Where is the **new** king to be born?” It can be argued that, more than any other topic, Jesus preached about the “kingdom of heaven.” And as we have seen from today’s Gospel and the previous 3 Sundays that we have been reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not attempting to modify the rules of this world, but rather wants to replace them with the rules of **his** kingdom. 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, which alone can drive out the darkness in our world.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., who staked his life on the teachings found in today’s Gospel, once said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” Yet over and over in our personal and corporate lives we meet violence with violence, hate with hate, all the while proclaiming we follow Jesus.

Now you may, by this time, have come up with all sorts of reasons and justifications why we **cannot** follow Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. “They’re too idealistic. Not realistic. There are some people who are just so evil we *must* wipe them off the face of the earth. And if I didn’t retaliate against the person who hurt me, before long they’d be walking all over me. Everybody knows that!” But in today’s Gospel, Jesus takes what “everybody knows” – “you have heard it said” – and overrules it (“But I say to you...”).

We are caught in the tension between “human nature” and being children of God.

And therein, I believe, lies the answer! For what Jesus is teaching is not how to solve all the issues of our world or the problems of our lives, or even how to be better human beings; but rather he is teaching us how to be the children of God we were meant to be. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus says, “*so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...*” Our Father in heaven makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous, so as his children, we should also want and pray and work for the best for everyone, evil and good, righteous and unrighteous. Jesus died for those who crucified him every bit as much as he died for you and me.

In the final verse of today’s passage, Jesus sums up his teaching by saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Now the word translated “perfect” is the Greek word *telos*, which Professor David Lose¹ says implies less a moral perfection than it does *reaching one’s intended outcome*. The *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of a peach tree is to yield peaches. Which means that instead of “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” we could translate it, “Be the person and community God created you to be...” God has plans and a purpose for you. God intends to use you to achieve something wonderful. And that something wonderful is precisely to be who you

were created to be, what *The Message* translation calls “your God-created selves;” and in so doing, to help create a different kind of world, which Jesus calls “the kingdom of God (or, in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven).” In *The Message* translation, Jesus tells us: “*Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” As children of God and members of the body of Christ, we are more than we have settled for; we can *absolutely* make a difference in the world if we simply live out of our true selves – who we are in God. These “commands” in today’s Gospel are in reality an *invitation* to **be** those people God has created us to be so that we might make a difference to those around us, sharing the Spirit of God as the children of God we are. That is why we come here, Sunday after Sunday, attend Adult Forum, attend to Scriptures read and sermons preached, sing our hearts out, exchange the Peace of the Lord with those we may be holding a grudge against, receive the body and blood of Christ: we come here to remember who we are at the core of our being. As Richard Rohr states, “the only and single purpose of religion is to lead you to an experience of your True Self in God.”³ And our True Self in God does not live by “human nature” – *an eye for an eye* – but by our nature as children of God – *Love your enemies*. As *The Message* translation of today’s passage reads, “When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves.”

And so this week, perhaps you could think of just one thing that gets in the way of your being the kind of person God created you to be. And then next Sunday, when you come to the altar to receive communion, silently leave that thing, that obstacle, at the altar for God to take care of.

As God’s family on earth, with the kingdom of God within and among us (as I mentioned last week), we are able to live by Jesus’ radical ethics *now*, and model a new and different way of being in the world – “kingdom living”. As we say at the invitation to communion: “Behold who you are (the body of Christ), become what you receive (the body of Christ).” Or as C.S. Lewis put it, “Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”⁴ And as “little Christs,” we are to imitate the life of him who lived by the teachings he taught, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, not returning evil for evil, and pouring out his life for all – evil and good, righteous and unrighteous.

AMEN

¹ Much of this sermon comes from ...*in the Meantime*, a blog by David Lose, both his 2014 edition and his 2017 edition regarding this Gospel lesson.

² Greg Carey, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*.

³ Richard Rohr, *A Spring Within Us: A Book of Daily Meditations*, Albuquerque: CAC Publishing, 2016, p. 66

⁴ from *Mere Christianity*