

Matthew 5:38-48

[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."

Perfect?

February 19, 2017

Pastor Richard Floyd shared this wonderful devotion recently that spoke powerfully to me about forgiveness. And it echoes the words of Jesus as he calls us to love our enemies and those who do us wrong. He tells it like this.

"After the Charleston church massacre a friend told me that he thought it was weak for the families of the slain to forgive their murderer at his hearing. I said, "I found it most inspiring." "Well you would, wouldn't you?" he said, "You're a Christian!" At that moment, I was reminded that I take certain things for granted that are not shared by everyone. I'd like to think I would have been able to do what those family members did, or at least know it is what I should do.

But I realize that forgiveness is a scandal to many people, even within the church. A couple I go to church with told me how they previously attended a congregation in a suburb of New York City. The week after the 9/11 attacks their pastor preached on forgiveness. Their town, like many in the area, had a number of people who died when the World Trade Center towers fell.

Their pastor was fired for the sermon on forgiveness. Not fired in the Donald Trump "clean out your desk" sort of way, but in the discreet way that upper middle-class folks do it. They said it took only a few influential members, but in a matter of weeks he was gone, called to "new fields of service."

At the center of our worship spaces is a cross, a reminder that Jesus died forgiving those who murdered him. It was a scandal then, and it is still a scandal."

Over the last few weeks we have been listening to Jesus as he shares with his disciples and the crowds who are following them, how he thinks we should live in the world as his followers. That the world has one way of seeing things as he says, "You have heard it said." And then going on to tell us, "Here is another way and as my followers I want you to choose this better way. That the world blesses those who have power but I want you to feel blessed when you are poor in spirit. That you are blessed when you mourn or are persecuted. That you are salt in the world, you are light in the world. That the thoughts you have, are just as important as the actions you take." And today he once again confronts us with cultural and behavioral norms, and challenges us to strive for a perfection that quite frankly seems to be beyond most of us.

There is of course a cultural context for these statements and we should try to hear them in that context. In the lives of Jesus' community, it was an acceptable practice to follow the 'eye for an eye' code of justice. It was measured justice in a sense, because it only required an equitable or measured response and not an all-out blood bath or unrestrained vengeance. In the Old Testament, the law of the land was equal retaliation. If someone took your cow, you could rightfully take his lamb. If your fence was broken by your adversary, you didn't ask him to repair it, you simply broke his fence. If a neighbor boy threw a rock and took out your child's tooth, you were obligated to knock the other kid's tooth out. That was the legal system. That was defined justice.

It was also normal for Roman soldiers to exercise their right to enlist anyone they met to carry their baggage or equipment for one mile. Being struck on the cheek with the back of the hand was what someone would do to insult another person. If the offended person showed any reaction, the next blow came with the palm or the fist. Somewhat similar to the rituals surrounding duels where one person takes his glove and slaps the other challenging them. Turning the other cheek sent the message that the offended person would not be fighting back.

So when Jesus says to them that these culturally acceptable practices are no longer acceptable it must have come as quite a shock. When Jesus said these words, it must have stunned his hearers. "What do you mean, Jesus? Are we just supposed to take it? Just let people hit us, and boss us, and steal from us?" Are we supposed to love and forgive them? Pray for them? And the radical implication of Jesus' words is, "yes." And it is just as radical today.

Minister Woody Garvin, spent his first years in ministry working among the Native Americans on the Hoopa Reservation in northern California. He tells the story of two young men who grew up in his congregation. Gerald Marshall was reared by his mother, Marie, a single parent. Gerald was somewhat challenged mentally, but he did all right. He worked at the post office as the night custodian, and served as a leader in the little reservation church.

Pliny Doud was the other young man. His father, George, was also a single parent, and had raised Pliny. Pliny drifted away from the church. He started drinking heavily, and fell in with a rough crowd. One night, he and his friends decided to have some fun. They went to the post office to harass Gerald Marshall, the night custodian. But things did not go well. Gerald became confused, and began to resist. One thing led to another. Pushing turned to hitting. When it was all over, Gerald was lying on the floor. He didn't move. The other boys ran. When someone finally found Gerald lying on the floor, he was dead.

Both the Marshall family and the Doud family had been members of the little reservation church. Both families left the church after the murder. Sometime later, Marie Marshall, Gerald's mother, began to attend church again. So did George Doud, the father of the boy who had killed Marie's son. One day, George came late to church and searched for a place to sit. The little church was nearly full. There was only one seat available. It was right next to Marie Marshall. So, George sat down. It was Communion Sunday.

Woody Garvin, the pastor, wondered what would happen when the communion elements were passed. What he saw was this: When the bread was passed, George Doud handed Marie Marshall the bread and said, "The love of Christ be with you!" And Marie responded, "And also with you!" When he handed her the cup, he said, "The peace of Christ be with you!" And she replied, "And also with you!"

Christ always challenges us. He always calls us to be better than we are. He loves us too much to leave us the way we are. Sometimes he asks the impossible. To be perfect as his father in heaven is perfect. But then, through his life and love, he makes what seems impossible, possible. (Richard Niell Donovan)

So how do you think about your enemies or those you have decided to hate or dislike or judge? And how can we let Jesus work through us and bring us to this perfection? How do you find yourself called to ‘turn the other cheek, give more than asked of you, walk the second mile, give to the one who begs from you, or pray for the one who persecutes you?’ And are you able to see these responses as signs of strength and not weakness?

I had an interesting revelation a couple years ago when I realized I have enemies. Or rather let me say, “I had someone whom I thought of as my enemy, someone who stood in opposition to what I believed was right. And I had, along with others, made him the bad guy and have felt anger and even hatred for what this person had done to something I hold precious. But I had been serving as a volunteer chaplain at Cannon Memorial Hospital where I would visit patients and we would pray and sing together. And one day it occurred to me that it might be very possible, that at some point in time, this person, that I made my enemy, might very well be the next patient I come to visit. How will I respond? How will I love him and pray for him? And so I began that day to pray for him. I can’t tell you that he has changed, but I know I have. That even my enemy is a child of this God whom I have dedicated my life to following, and Jesus is asking us all to do the same. To be the ones in the world who choose to live differently; to choose love over hate; to choose humility over vengeance; forgiveness over condemnation to strive for perfection as our heavenly father is perfect.

And when Jesus uses this word perfect he means to be complete, be whole, in fact for me he is saying you are being made whole and complete in God. That you are being made perfect, wholesome, and full of His presence as you abide and grow into his love. And when you do that, you are able to see not only your enemy, but everyone you encounter as a child of God. This is different. This is not how the world works but it is how God works, and if you want to be his child, then it is how you will need to work as well.

I read a wonderful Sermon by Pastor Steve Moline which he titled “He Hit Me first!” You can tell by the title how that story began but in his conclusion he shares these thoughts. He says: “Imagine how the world would be if just the Christians stopped fighting. Think for a minute what our neighborhoods would look like, or our churches, or our families, or our political arenas, if the followers of Christ turned the other cheek whenever possible. What if two billion Christians became convinced of Jesus’ call to love and kindness and grace, and began to live our lives that way? The world would be changed.

But it doesn’t start with 2 billion. It starts with one. When you go to Wal-Mart after worship, maybe you’ll let someone have that primo parking space, even though you got there first. When someone bites your head off for no reason maybe rather than snapping back, you’ll take a breath and pray for them, because something must be going on. When your significant other forgets to take out the trash, again, rather than calling them lazy, you just take out the trash because you can and you love them. When the dog chews your favorite shoe you don’t yell at her, but recognize that you were the one who didn’t take her out to play or get any exercise. When you are criticized by others, you don’t take it personally and try to get back at them but say, “you may be right” and then get to work on yourself. And when your Joey is punched by their Billy, you don’t call your lawyer. You call Billy’s dad and say “Let’s take the boys to a ball game so we can have them become friends, not enemies.”

If we belong to the God of Grace, we must become people of grace. There’s no other way. And someday, somewhere, someone will be explaining how it is that the neighborhood lives at peace, and they will point to you and say “He started it.” No, “She started it.” No, “They started it!”

Thanks be to God! Let us pray.

Holy Jesus,
you call us into a life that others have told us is easy, but it is not.
You challenge us to forgive, to love our enemies,
To bless those who curse us.
We want the easy way,
but you had to give us the hard path.
Grant us the patience and endurance to journey with you,
To allow ourselves at times to stumble,
to live into the hard way
so that we might fully experience
your love, grace and peace in this world,
by becoming a people full of love and
grace and forgiving others.
In Your name we pray Amen
Prayer by Rev.Mindi.