

February 19, 2017 – 7th Sunday after Epiphany



"Perfection in Love's Light"

Sermon by Tricia Lindley

Matthew 5:38-48

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.

There's an old story that goes like this...

A successful Irish boxer on one occasion was converted, he grew in faith and became a preacher of the gospel. He happened to be in a new town, setting up his evangelistic tent, and a couple of tough thugs noticed what he was doing. Knowing nothing of the evangelist's background, they made a few insulting remarks to him. The Irishman merely turned and looked at them. Pressing his luck, one of the bullies took a swing and struck a glancing blow on one side of the ex-boxer's face. He shook it off and said nothing as he stuck out his jaw to him again. The fellow took another glance and blew him on the side of the cheek. At that point, the preacher swiftly took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and announced: 'The Lord gave me no further instructions!'

Believe it or not this is how some people view the sermon on the mount, reading it without context or consideration for the setting in which it was told.

This sermon on the mount is a collection of Jesus' teachings, a setting that mimics Moses' journey up Mount Sinai to receive the Torah to guide how the Hebrew people were to live. Similarly, Jesus is now "on the mount" and speaking to the law, teaching his followers how to live life abundantly in God.

Jesus is challenging his followers to a way of life that dives deeper into the law, that goes to the heart of the law. We are given challenges that ask us to go beyond, to extend ourselves in the way of God's love. We've all heard this scripture before - and these particular challenges are ones that are greatly misunderstood.

We often think: Jesus is telling us to let someone slap us a second time, to let someone take not just one but all of our things, and to never say no. And we think, Jesus is teaching us that the path of discipleship requires us to be doormats - at its worst we think it justifies injustice and abusive relationships.

But let's step back for a moment and consider the context of his teaching.

He is talking to those who are poor: peasants, servants, women and children.

He is talking within the Jewish context of 1st century Roman occupation.

The biggest, baddest empire of all time, who used violence to assert power over those they occupied.

A society with masters over slaves, husbands over wives.

He is talking to people who had no rights and within a society of strict honor and conduct codes for how to behave based on social status, all of this situated around shame and guilt. He's addressing the most powerless.

The behaviors Jesus describes were not the kind of things "anyone" could do. They were the things only a privileged few could do in this society - and they did them to the crowds who were listening to Jesus.

Jesus starts the first example with "if anyone strikes you..." which means these are people who are used to being struck. Slapping the right cheek was something done by Masters to slaves or servants. It was about asserting status and power over another. Jesus tells them to turn their cheek in this situation. By turning the cheek, the servant makes it physically impossible for the master to use the backhand again given the strict codes of the time that said they couldn't use their left hand. The master can now offer a blow with his right fist, but hitting with your fist is only done between equals. This turning the cheek is an act of defiance. In a world of honor and shame, this strips the power from the master at its core. Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating."

How different from how we normally read it! It is not about letting ourselves get hit again. It is about recognizing our power, our humanity and equality - in a way that is neither cowering for it to happen again or fighting back and joining the cycle of violence that was done to us. This is Jesus' third way.

Or consider another... “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Roman soldiers were allowed to force civilians, occupied people, to carry their packs, but only for one mile according to military law with the threat of shame and punishment if not upheld by the soldiers. Walking a mile with a heavy pack and then back again would mean missing that day’s labour, and therefore a day’s food for your family. This was not a minor inconvenience for the many people who were day laborers. Offering to go a second mile publicly exposes the injustice while seeming to cooperate with the system, it exposes the hardship of being forced to go even one mile. This is a calculated response of nonviolent action. In the words of Walter Wink, a biblical scholar and theologian, “Evil can be opposed without being mirrored... Enemies can be neutralized without being destroyed.”

Jesus continues,

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

At this time, love was not understood as an internal/emotional feeling or attitude.

Jesus is not asking his listeners to “feel the love” to their enemies.

In his context, love must always have an external expression.

To love our enemies means to recognize that we are bonded with that person, that my fate is tied with theirs in our mutual humanity.

Jesus is asking his disciples to step beyond what we are actually capable of doing on our own and into God’s expansive love that recognizes our connection to all, that disarms injustice, that forgives and loves over common sense.

To love so openly, we need help. We can’t get there on our own. We need God’s love to flood into our hearts so that we might grasp and begin to live out this all-inclusive and perfect love.

Jesus continues, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Most days my understanding of perfect looks like a checklist - and when I fall short, I feel guilty and ashamed.

Perfect looks like:

The perfect relationship

The perfect grades

The perfect job

The perfect family

The perfect Instagram post

The call to perfect sounds impractical and unattainable.

This checklist that leads to perfect ends up creating a cycle of guilt each time we don’t measure up. It is a checklist to get to perfect.

But the way Jesus uses perfect, he is speaking of a path and not an endpoint or destination without flaws. It is a path of maturing, growing up in the spiritual life and of life with God.

I spent some time with my cousins this past week. My cousin Kelly has four wonderful little girls between 8 and 14 years old and she always has wonderful stories about them.

Charlotte’s 3rd grade class was studying black history this past month and was asked to write a letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. about his work towards Civil Rights. At the end of the letter she thanked him for his work because it meant that her Mexican father and white mother could be together and have her and her sisters.

Perfect love is open to God, it receives love and gives it back. It allows an 8-year-old girl to connect the civil rights movement of the 1960’s to her own life as a young Mexican-American girl growing up in Texas.

This Scripture demands that we confront challenges and injustice in a creative and non-violent way. It demands that we go beyond the required mile and love beyond what is loveable. And since this is asking the impossible, we know that we can’t do this on our own.

Recognizing our need for God opens our hearts to this love that is so much greater than we ourselves can ever get to. And as God opens our hearts, we begin the journey of perfect love that includes many mis-steps, wrong turns and mistakes along the way. To be perfect is to make the journey of embracing God’s unending love for ourselves and to then extend that love in the world to others.