

## Love Them Anyway

### Matthew 5:38-48

Greg Carey told this story: Stumbling into the kitchen after a long day of work, I put down my groceries and pressed the voice-mail button. (This was back in the day before everyone had a cell phone.) It was my (then) ten-year-old daughter Erin. "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."

Jesus often said things that make us chafe; he challenged the disciples to do things that seem contrary to human nature.

The phrases of the Sermon on the Mount are so familiar and beautiful but they are also demanding. "Turn the other cheek;" forgo revenge, give more than the required in a lawsuit, go the extra mile, give to all who beg, lend without limits, love the enemy, pray for persecutors, and greet the stranger; "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." How lovely, how close to home, how ... impossible. Love your *enemies*? Respond to the fist by opening yourself up to more fists? Pray for your *persecutors*? As if that's not enough, *be perfect*. The final command is given as an afterthought: "Oh yes, and besides all that, be flawless." Right.

It is no wonder we Christians have developed elaborate strategies for avoiding these commands, impossible and offensive as they are. Some historians tell us that Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek is buried in historical *obscurata*: it was an offensive gesture to Jews in the ancient world to be slapped with the back of the right hand. Turning the other cheek makes it impossible to be so slapped again. Suddenly the command seems historically distant and irrelevant to us. If we bind

the hands of the text that way, sit back and listen for us to exhale: "Whew, I was hoping Jesus didn't mean it." How can we rub the edges off the command to lend to everyone who asks? To love enemies? To be perfect? Here is how Christians have done it: These are spiritual admonitions, directed at our souls, not at the outward manifestations of our bodies, which may have to hoard stuff, bomb our enemies, and settle for being spiritual slackers.

In a world that is "all about me," Jesus offers an alternative we find difficult to imagine and embody. Today who can be perfect? It is easier to be mean, hold grudges, ignore those in need. If I give to everyone who begs, I will have nothing left for myself. If I turn the other cheek, I will get slapped again. If I get sued, I am hiring the best lawyer I can afford to find a loophole in my favor. If I love my enemies, I will be more persecuted or even killed. If I am too nice, I will be seen as weak, a pushover, a doormat.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus at his ornery best: offering "advice" that makes no sense divorced from the nature of the one giving it. In fact, the wisdom proffered here is not at all new, despite the formulation, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." In terms of *content*, Jesus offered here nothing he did not learn at Mary's knee. It is in terms of the *speaker* that these words take on radical resonance. Our constant temptation to boil down the hard particulars of Jesus into a mushy, vaguely deistic faith, suitable for a Hallmark card, is here put to rout. Jesus, in all his Jewish, biblical, demanding particularity, will have none of it.

"The Lord who accompanies us on our journey offered his own cheek to slaps and his shoulders to whips, to the increase of his glory," one ancient Christian teacher said. We are called here to love as God loves. This cannot be done out of our own resources. So this is no admonition to try harder—if it were, it would indeed be recipe for despair. It is a plan of action rooted in the promise to be made

"children of your Father in heaven" (v. 45). The Sermon here and elsewhere is a portrait of the very heart of God, one who loves the unlovable, comes among us in Christ, suffers our worst, and rises to forgive us. Turn the cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy—because that is how God loves. If you want to follow this God, fleshed in Jesus, you will be adopted into a life in which you find yourself loving this way before you know what you are doing.

One commentator tells of a friend who grew up with missionary parents in a favela in Brazil. Asked how her family could live among the poorest of the world's poor without danger of being robbed, she said, "Simple. You can't own anything anyone would want to steal." Lend to anyone who asks, give to all who want to borrow. Then you can live among God's poor and receive the blessing of possessing nothing. For Jesus, God incarnate, possesses nothing, except our hearts.

Jesus did not say this would be easy. The Bible was written by and for people under savage persecution. Scripture holds up well when read by powerless people under the thumb of an empire as mighty as Rome's. We think our "enemy" is the person badgering us with critical e-mails. Think instead of a soldier with the power of life or death over you commandeering your labor, and your offering to do twice what he asks. Think of immigrants and refugees who you believe hate you. Jesus said love them anyway! God makes our enemies into divine friends, makes orphans into daughters and sons (v. 45) in God's incarnation and crucifixion. God gives to us extravagantly, even nonsensically. How can we do otherwise?

Jesus also tells us to be perfect. Perfection means loving as God loves, with every breath God gives us. Impossible? Too much? "God well knew how ready our unbelief would be to cry out, This is impossible! And therefore stakes upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of God, to whom all things are possible." **Jason Byassee**

Jesus does state what the payoff will be: to inherit the reign of God. What do we get for loving, forgiving, being kind and gracious, and offering generosity? Some of us are too suspicious of the outcome and may resist living the values of God's realm. We are more intent on making sure no one has a chance to abuse or tyrannize us again. Some of us are so stubborn we would rather be right than be in relationship with others.

This text carries two challenges. First, Jesus taught about life in God's realm. God's community is filled with people who think of others first. Every decision and action is carried out for the common good. Each person is sister or brother to the other and acts out of love. The capacity for this kind of love is due to the empowering love given by God, who is love. We are able to be gracious, forgiving, hospitable, and generous because we are children of the God who showers us with abundant grace, mercy, love, and protection. Those who know God's love now can love their enemies; those who experience God's forgiveness now can forgive those who persecute them; those who claim God's gift of generosity can now give to those who have little or nothing. We are able to do these things because in Jesus we live in the days of God's reign.

Second, Jesus let his listeners know that he himself embodied these values. He moved us from "you have heard that it was said" to "but I say to you" We no longer have to rely solely on the written word to understand God and God's will for creation. We simply have to look at and listen to Jesus. Jesus shifted the authority from what was *to himself*—God's word made flesh and dwelling in our midst. Because of Jesus, God's realm is already present and moving toward its fulfillment. Within us already are the marks of those fully embraced by God and empowered by God's will. Jesus calls us to maturity that results in more Godlike behaviors and motivations.

Today we are caught in the tension between human nature and being children of God. To be perfect is not to add pressure to already overwhelmed lives; instead, it is to assure us that we are not alone in the world and that God continues to work in and through us. Perfection is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves, and Jesus is God's concrete example of that love.

We are amazed by people's capacity to do things that defy our natural instincts: the survivor of a violent crime who is able to forgive her tormenter; that forgiving church in North Carolina where the man came and killed the members of the Bible study group; the Mother Teresas of the world who give selfless service to outcasts; those who live modestly so they can contribute to the well-being of the less fortunate; and those who make a choice to commit random acts of kindness. We are surrounded by examples of unselfish love and caring; we need only look for them. God's realm is already active and moving toward fulfillment.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lets us eavesdrop on his instructions to the disciples. We too are encouraged to live as sisters and brothers in God's realm. "Be perfect" and "Love your enemies" are not indictments; these are promises that carry the possibility that we may love the world as God has loved us—fully, richly, abundantly, and completely. **Barbara J. Essex**

Jesus says to love our enemies. We say that it is too difficult. Jesus says...love them anyway!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.