

Love Your Enemy

Matthew 5:38-48

The phrases of the Sermon on the Mount are so familiar and beautiful we can almost forget how demanding they are. "Turn the other cheek." "Go the second mile." "Love your enemies." "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.

Jesus often says things that make us chafe; he challenged the disciples to do things that seem contrary to human nature. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the disciples to 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. Jesus highlighted the surprises that characterize life in God's realm; he challenged the disciples to do the opposite of what seems normal and reasonable.

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.

We might not say these things out loud, but we think them. For others, these feelings seem justified—African Americans, as we celebrate Black history month,

still suffer the vestiges of slavery and race discrimination, Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans live with the tattooed numbers of the internment from World War II; survivors of the Holocaust; Hispanic Americans who are discriminated against with "English Only" requirements; women who make less money than men doing the same job; those around the globe who suffer at the hands of oppressors; and the list goes on and on. Jesus' call to forgive and be reconciled rings hollow and just doesn't sound fair. **Barbara J. Essex**

It is no wonder we Christians have developed elaborate strategies for avoiding these commands, because they are impossible and offensive to us. Some historians tell us that Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek is buried in historical *obscurata* which taught 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. With this explanation the command seems historically distant and irrelevant to us. If we bind the text this way, we exhale and say: "Whew, I was hoping Jesus didn't mean it." Okay, but how can we rub the edges off the command to lend to everyone who asks? To love enemies? To be perfect? Here is how some 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.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus at his best: offering "advice" that makes no sense separated from the nature of the one giving it. In fact, the wisdom offered here is not at all new. "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." Jesus offers here nothing he did not learn at Mary's knee. Our constant temptation is to boil down the hard particulars of Jesus into a mushy faith, suitable for a Hallmark card. However, Jesus, in all his Jewishness, demands action and not just nice words.

"The Lord who accompanies us on our journey offers 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. 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 thing this text expressly is *not* is an admonition doomed to failure—a word of judgment meant to drive us into the arms of grace. It will seem that way if it is taken as isolated moral admonition for straining heroes to accomplish through their lonely determination, like marathon runners. If, however, this is a blueprint for the life of the church, a constitution for a new society, then we have a chance.

One commentator told 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.

These instructions are not easy – they are difficult. Sometimes we think if we lived back in the “good old days” we could do these easily. However the Bible was written by and for people under savage persecution. Jesus made these statements to powerless people under the thumb of the mighty Roman Empire. We

think our "enemy" is Murietta badgering us for articles to the newsletter. 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. For another modern parallel, think of the insurance companies asking ever more of our income to insure ever fewer of us. This text would say: they want how much? Give them more. God makes 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?

A hallmark of John Wesley's Methodist revival and the variety of Holiness movements he spurred (Nazarene, Holiness, Assemblies of God) was the great seriousness with which they took Jesus command in 5:48 to be perfect. Why would Jesus command such a thing if it were impossible? Sure enough, saints often experienced full sanctification on death's door. Why not a day earlier? Or a year? Perfection does not mean always choosing the right fork at the dinner table, nor does it mean attaining to such divine attributes as omniscience. It 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**

What do we get for loving, forgiving, being kind and gracious, and offering generosity? Jesus states what the payoff will be: to inherit the reign of God. Jesus uses this scripture to tell the disciples and us 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 back 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.

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; black South Africans who work with their former oppressors to rebuild their country; 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. "Love your enemy;" and "Be perfect" are not indictments; they 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**

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