

A New Righteousness: Holy, Perfect Love

We opened our service this morning, as is our custom, in prayer. We raised our voices in songs of petition as we gathered: “Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove... kindle a flame of sacred love in our hearts... teach our hearts to praise;” “Lord, we want to be like Jesus... more loving...” We joined in reciting together one of the ancient prayers of Israel, a psalm: “Blessed are you, O Lord; teach us your statutes. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your law.” As we came together this morning, we recognized our need to live lives pleasing to the Loving Creator of All. And we spoke, perhaps without realizing it, the key to living just that kind of life. “Make us loving,” we said, “just like Jesus... just like the Holy Spirit... just like the God of Moses.”

We are dawdling along in Epiphany this year because of the very late date of Easter which has also left us waiting until March for the beginning of Lent. The benefit of this odd quirk in our church calendar is that we have not only had time for the traditional Epiphany stories of the revealing of Jesus as the Messiah of God but also for the very core of Jesus’ teaching as recorded by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. In this great compilation of the sayings of Jesus, we are led to a new understanding of the life that is pleasing to God, a life that shows our love for God and for God’s Creation, particularly our fellow human beings. “Here’s how to be happy,” we’ve heard Jesus say. “Be humble before God; be concerned about evil and about those around you; seek God’s will like you were starving for it; make peace.” Jesus tells us that he has not come to abolish the Law revealed to Moses but to fulfill it, to bring it to its fullest, best meaning.

And so, after telling his listeners (and by extension, us) that we are to be the catalyst for changing the world, Jesus proceeds to reinterpret the Law according to his understanding of God’s call on our lives. We are, as Denise told us last week, to have a different attitude towards our sisters and brothers – guarding against inappropriate anger, respecting their personhood rather than making them objects for our passions, either anger or lust, not rejecting those in our care and dealing honestly with all. In our reading for this week, Jesus goes one step further, teaching a new approach to those who stand opposed to us in one way or another. We are to do this, he says, because this is the way that God does things.

To begin with, let us be sure that we are hearing Jesus’ teachings the way those on that hillside would have heard them. Jesus begins with what we might call the Law of Proportional Response – “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” It is easy for us in the safe haven of 21st century Lynnwood to cluck at this as barbarism and to cite Gandhi’s famous saying that this is a sure way to a blind and toothless world. But we forget a couple of important things. First, “an eye for an eye” was a tremendous advance in justice at a time when blood feuds raged for centuries and when disproportional response was the order of the day. The Biblical witness is that without God humankind slides very easily into a one-upsmanship of revenge. In Genesis 4, we read the story of the first murder, a fratricide, as Cain kills his brother Abel. Upon receiving the sentence of wandering upon the Earth from God, Cain expresses his fear that every man’s hand will be against him. God promises him protection in the form of a special mark that will warn would-be revengers that whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance. But within six generations, Cain’s violent line has produced Lamech, who boasts, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” A philosophy of disproportional response rapidly spirals out of control. By the way, does Lamech’s threat help you understand why Jesus told Peter to forgive his brother, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times”?

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We also may forget, in our comfortable vantage point, that even if good, Law-abiding Jews had been following the concept of “an eye for an eye,” occupying armies rarely do. Indeed, occupiers and their opponents, whom we call either terrorists or patriots, depending on whose side we’re taking, are well known for utilizing disproportionate response to demoralize their enemies. Jesus’ audience, who would have been used to the sight of hundreds of their neighbors crucified along the roadside in response to any show of force against Rome, certainly knew this. And, lest we begin to feel too smug, let us remember that even upstanding American leaders have been known to at least consider this tactic. I have a fictional example but it’s a true one, nonetheless. In the television series, “The West Wing,” President Josiah Bartlett was clearly meant to represent, in creator Aaron Sorkin’s vision, the most ethical political leadership America had to offer. But when his personal physician was killed in a plane crash caused by Middle Eastern terrorists (or patriots, depending), Bartlett came out with verbal guns blazing, demanding, “A disproportional response. Let the word ring forth from this time and this place, you kill an American, any American, we don’t come back with a proportional response, we come back with total disaster!” His wise chief of staff, Leo McGarry, talked him down but the lesson was clear. It is easy for the spirit of vengeance to take over and to raise the stakes and to keep raising them.

We must also be careful, now that we have “an eye for an eye” in its proper place, not to misunderstand what Jesus says next. Our normally reliable NRSV translation does us a disservice here. As many commentators point out, the Greek here does not simply mean “Do not resist evil (or an evildoer)” but instead “Do not violently resist evil.” We all know that Jesus resisted evil with all his heart. He resisted the temptations of Satan. He called out and resisted the evil of legalism in the Pharisees. He exorcised evil spirits. But the closest he came to violence himself was in chasing the moneychangers from the Temple and overturning their tables. Of our English translations of the Bible, “Good News for Modern Man” comes closest to getting it right: “Do not take revenge on someone who does you wrong.” In other words, don’t enter into the spiraling cycle of violence.

If you are dubious about this re-translation, I can offer you some other Biblical references that show that this idea continued among Jesus’ followers. In one of his earliest letters, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.” Later, to the church in Rome, Paul wrote, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all... Beloved, never avenge yourselves... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Jesus gave his listeners some concrete examples of how to resist evil without violence and, again, we need to be sure we understand them in their first century context. I’m going to ask Connie to come up and help me demonstrate. Now, if Connie wants to slap me on my right cheek, she has two options. First, she can slap me with her left hand. This might seem natural to any southpaws out there but remember, in the Middle East, the left hand is reserved for, as one commentator delicately puts it, “toilet functions. It is a serious insult to place that hand on the table, use it in eating, or extend it to others.” This is such a deeply learned taboo that no one would be likely to strike another person with their left hand. The other option Connie has, then,

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is to backhand me. Just as now, a backhand blow in first century culture was considered a putdown more than a serious attack. The great New Testament scholar Walter Wink writes, "Now the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure. It is a symbolic blow. It is intended to put you back where you belong. It is always from a position of power or superiority. The back of the hand was given by a master to a slave or by a husband to a wife or by a parent to a child or a Roman to a Jew in that period." But if I am struck in such a manner and then turn my other cheek toward the person attempting to "put me in my place," they cannot now use the backhand with their right hand. I am, in a nonviolent but perhaps insolent way, insisting that they strike me as an equal, with the forehand. As Wink writes, "By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying to the master, "I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You can't put me down even if you have me killed." This is clearly no way to avoid trouble. The master might have you flogged within an inch of your life, but he will never be able to assert that you have no dignity." This is resistance, but it is non-violent resistance.

Jesus' contemporaries had, in fact, seen nonviolent resistance work, as have we. During Jesus' lifetime, they had seen a successful nonviolent protest succeed in getting the Romans' banners with images of Caesar removed from the city of Jerusalem. Later, a similar tactic worked in preventing the placement of a statue of Caesar Caligula in the Temple (or at least delaying it until Caligula was overthrown by his own armies). And in the lifetimes of most of us, we have seen the successes of the Civil Rights Movement in America, the Solidarity movement in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and, in recent days, the nonviolent uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Of course, the tactics of nonviolence don't always produce immediate results or, indeed, any result. The next time the Jews tried a nonviolent protest with Pontius Pilate, he had them cut down where they stood. And I imagine many of us remember the tanks of Tiananmen Square in 1989 or even those in the Prague Spring of 1968. But the Jews kept their distinctive religion and culture alive even without the Temple, freedom came to Prague at last and perhaps will someday come to Beijing. And we Christians preach Christ and him crucified.

Jesus next two examples are also miniature tales of oppressors being put in very embarrassing situations by those they are trying to oppress. In Deuteronomy, those who lend to the very poor are told that they can accept someone's outer garment as collateral but only if they return it at night as it served as blanket and pillow as well. They could then return to their debtor in the morning and demand the cloak again, hoping in the long run to finally be repaid. But Jesus told his listeners that if someone tried to take their outer garment permanently, they should just hand over their inner garment as well, leaving themselves naked. In Israel, to see another's nakedness was as taboo as being seen naked. Now the creditor and debtor are equally embarrassed as is the judge. The only recourse is for the judge to dismiss or the creditor to drop the case. The injustice of taking a poor man's only shelter is defeated.

Likewise, a Roman soldier was authorized to conscript a member of the occupied citizenry to carry his pack but only for a mile. Walter Wink suggests that carrying the pack a second mile is sly insurrection, indeed. What might seem to be an ultimate subjugation is instead a way to get the subjugator in trouble with his commanders. Glen Stassen, my former professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and now Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Seminary, has a more irenic interpretation, however. Assuming that a follower of Jesus was

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allowed to carry the pack for a second mile without dire result to the soldier, what sort of conversation might this engender between the two? Can we imagine a question of why someone would do such a thing turning to an explanation of the new teacher and his ways, perhaps even stories of his miraculous healings? Could such a conversation spread among the ranks or stay with a newly promoted soldier, so that as a centurion he might go to Jesus to beg for the life of his servant and have Jesus reply, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith”? Or might the story have come to a centurion assigned to a routine crucifixion who was moved to say, “Truly this was the Son of God”?

In his next statement, “Give to everyone who begs from you,” Jesus begins a turn from nonviolent resistance to love. From an act of charity (a Latin word, we should remember, for the highest form of love), Jesus goes on to add example after example of the unlikely ones we are to love. Not just beggars but those who have stood against us and actively harmed us, our enemies and our persecutors. The juxtaposition is a good reminder to us that successful nonviolent resistance must be fueled by love, by a deep respect for the personhood of those to whom we stand in opposition. If we oppose without love, it is far too easy for a nonviolent façade to crack and hatred to come pouring out in the form of violence and revenge. But when we love those who are different to us, even those who are our enemies, then we begin to construct a way of living under God that is not based on exclusion but on compassion.

Why is this important? Remember Jesus’ statement that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. These religious leaders who were so zealous for the Law constructed their understanding of righteousness based on exclusion – only those who did things the way they did them were righteous. The rest, who didn’t follow the Law closely enough, who weren’t clean enough, were excluded. But Jesus tells us that God does not exclude – God loves. God sends the sun and the rain needed for crops and for life in equal measure to those who honor God and those who do not. God’s love is without boundaries. So must our love be without boundaries, so that we live into God’s compassion and are found righteous in God’s eyes as a result. We are to be complete in our loving as God is complete in loving. That, by the way, is the better translation of the Greek word rendered here as perfect. We may be scared off by the idea of being perfect but if we can love as completely as is possible, then we are most like God. I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse with the idea of being complete in mind: “You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity.”

It is a message, Jesus understands, that God has been trying to give to God’s people all along. Think of our passage from Leviticus: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” We may be as put off by the idea of trying to be holy as we are by the idea of trying to be perfect. But holy, in its Biblical roots, means to be set apart for God, to be different. That passage in Leviticus tells us how God wants us to be different: to share what we have with those who don’t have enough; to be honest in all our dealings, especially in business; not to take advantage of the weak; not to hate, but to love. The answer has been before the Pharisees all along and they’ve missed it. Now we have the key to righteousness that they had dropped. As Sr. Joyce Ann Zimmerman writes, “what it means to be perfect like God and holy like God is to love others even at a price to ourselves.”

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I was delighted to find this week a web-based commentary on this passage that illustrated Jesus' teachings about loving enemies with a reference to one of my favorite books, J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. "The moral center of the epic," writes Robert B. Kruschwitz of Baylor University, "is the pity of Bilbo." Perhaps some of you will remember that in The Hobbit, the story which sets up the trilogy proper, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins spares the life of the odd creature called Gollum, from whom he has inadvertently won the Great Ring of Power. As Bilbo and, later, his nephew Frodo Baggins learn, Gollum is a twisted and evil creature, a thief and a murderer, slave to the ring and sometimes-willing servant to its creator, Sauron, the embodiment of pure evil in Tolkien's tale. In the caves of Moria, Frodo and Gandalf the wizard discuss Gollum: "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature [Frodo declares] when he had a chance!" "Pity? [Gandalf replies] It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that [Bilbo] took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity. ...even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many -- yours not least." Kruschwitz quotes from an essay by Ralph Wood: "Bilbo's pity had a deeper source, the wizard Gandalf reminds them, which he calls 'pity' and Scripture names 'agape' (love). It is 'the love of those who are not only radically 'other' to us, but who deserve our scorn and cannot reciprocate our pardon," writes Wood. "We can make friends only with those whose convictions we share, but we are called to have pity for those whom we do not trust, even our enemies."

Tolkien, a devout Catholic, understood well Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. We are not to take violent vengeful action against evil. We are to take pity on, to love our enemies, even when they are as broken and twisted as Gollum. Even the very wise among us cannot see all ends. But God, who created us all and called us good, who sends sun and rain on the just and the unjust alike, can see all ends and for each of us God has a purpose. We are to be Holy as God is Holy. We are to be perfect, as God is perfect. We are to love, not just the church of God, not just Jesus, but all of those who God puts in our path. It is our love that rules our fate.