February 19, 2017

Matthew 5:38-48

**Intro to the reading of the text**: Well, we are continuing--in what Pastor Alanna so ably began last Sunday (I know, ‘cause I made her preach it to me when I got back this week!)—but we’re continuing our look at (and “listen to”) words from Jesus’ ***Sermon On the Mount***. The entire sermon is found in chapters five, six and seven of Matthew’s Gospel—takes about eight minutes to read (which oughta be a lesson for those of us who preach, right?—8 minute sermons sound about right to you-all?). But what Jesus is doing (in these radical words) is speaking to confusion people had--confusion over his teaching and gospel as it related to ancient Jewish Law. Because some folks were taking what Jesus was teaching and concluding that he’d come to abolish Old Testament Law—to do away with it. But Jesus (right near the beginning of his sermon) says that ***nothing could be further from the truth*** (verse 17)—says he did not come to abolish the law; he came to fulfill it. In other words, he came to take something God had given—given as a way for people to live faithfully in a time of chaos—something that had gotten all twisted and distorted—made to trivialize the relationship God intended with us—Jesus came to redeem that gift. And the way he redeems it is by giving these examples of what being his follower really looks like—of what sin and missing out on a relationship with him looks like. See, he wants us to understand that the life of the disciple—the life of those who would follow him—does not settle for trivialities—doesn’t settle for just keeping the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit of the law—disciples understand that it isn’t about scorekeeping—about proving ourselves better than the next person. No, the law was given because God is after our hearts—after our intentions, our attitudes, our minds, our motives—God wants it all--that deep obedience that can only happen when the Holy Spirit comes into us and regenerates us—transforms us—gives us a new heart—what it means to be “born again”… So, it’s not for the faint of heart, this word from Jesus, to which we now turn (if you’re willing) the words of Matthew chapter 5, beginning in verse 38… (read text & pray)

One of my teachers told me a story one time[[1]](#footnote-1)—about when she was at her nephew’s first birthday party--kid by the name of Will (which explains why I remember the story! ☺). Apparently--at the tender age of one--Will was round and bald as a Buddha—just starting to walk--barely on the verge of starting to talk--already a typical only child—never out of his parents’ sight--used to being the center of attention… (Any “onlies” here, this morning, who can testify?) But little Will was also still at the age of innocence--not spoiled yet—had not yet learned to manipulate love for his own purposes--just thought everybody else got loved the way he did, so he gave love away just as fast as he got it.

 Those of you who are parents know that first birthday parties aren’t kid parties yet, right?—they’re still just for family—in Will’s case, his parents, his aunts, uncles, grandparents, godparents—oh, and his godparents’ seven-year-old kid--Jason--about to become the central part of the story. See, after singing “Happy Birthday,” after the cake and ice cream, after the presents were all opened (and the wrapping paper played with rather than the presents!)--why, Will decides to let everybody know just how delighted he is by doing his brand new dance for the group—this shy, kind of “twirling-in-place” thing he’d put together--lots of fancy arm work--the family all circled ‘round—all ooh-ing and ah-ing--until all of a sudden, Jason—the seven year old--decides he’s had quite enough of Will’s little show--breaks into the circle--puts both his hands on Will’s chest--and shoves--meaning that precious little one-year-old--with his “all-wrong” center of gravity--falls—falls backwards—falls hard... Mercifully, his considerable rear end hit first, but then, so did his head. And we know that moment before the pain hits, right? Will just looking around surprised—nobody’d hurt him before—didn’t know what to make of it. But then the pain hit—and that little boy opened his mouth--and howled--howled at the moon--his momma rushing in to hug him—trying to make it all better…

Plenty of tears shed--but then, the most astonishing thing: Will stifles his crying--totters over to Jason--the one person he knew to be at the bottom of what just happened--totters over and does what he always did--reaches up and puts his arms around Jason--lays his head against that mean little boy’s body--and hugs him. And my teacher, in telling the story, says that in that moment all her Christian compassion went out the window--said to herself, “I’ll buy him a BB gun for his next birthday--brass knuckles—a karate video for toddlers—whatever it takes! Because it just about killed me thinking how that sweet child was gonna have to learn to defend himself. But it was either that or eat dust on the playground the rest of his life--some bully’s foot on the back of his head…”

But right then, all of a sudden, she remembered something--something from the Bible—something about not resisting an evildoer—something about not doing the “eye for an eye/tooth for a tooth” thing—something about loving people who don’t love you first... And as she remembered, it dawned on her that little Will was right and she was wrong—that what she wanted to do to that naughty Jason would only have multiplied the meanness in that room, while what Will did put an end to the meanness. And you and I might say, well, that’s sure idealistic--impractical--maybe even dangerous to your health; but still, there it is: “If anybody strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other... Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you…” And about all I can figure from this word is that Jesus must’ve had an incredible faith in the power of love--a faith most of us either do not share, or are unwilling to test. It’s that deep understanding Jesus had that the real enemy is not whoever pushes us down in the middle of our dance; the real enemy is whatever’s inside us that makes us want to jump up and push back. See, Jesus understood that evil is never satisfied with controlling just one side of a situation; no, its goal is to infect everybody—the victim along with the bully, the plaintiff along with the defendant, the offended along with the offender--so that when everybody has his or her dukes up in the air, when there’s a loaded gun in every household, why, then the enemy really will have won, because the whole point of evil is to recruit the good guys by making ‘em think they’re stopping the bad guys…

And to that kind of thinking, Jesus says no—that’s not how it’s done—not in my kingdom. Rather, “Bless those who persecute you,” because the only way to conquer evil is to absorb it—to take it into yourself and disarm it—to neutralize its acids, to serve as a kind of charcoal filter for its poison. Suck it up, put a straightjacket on it--turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure… And I need to tell you that there is nothing the least bit easy about any of this. There’s not even a guarantee it will work. But one thing’s for sure—that when we repay evil for evil, evil’s all there is, in bigger and more toxic piles--becoming a poison inside us. And the only way to reverse the pattern is to behave in ways unexpected—blessing the persecutor, feeding the enemy, embracing the bully—breaking the vicious cycle by refusing to participate in it anymore. Which is what love is, Jesus says—not some warm feeling between like-minded friends, but a simple, straight-forward imitation of Jesus, who took all the meanness of this world and ran it through the filter of his own body, repaying evil with good, blame with pardon, death with life…

 “What does God expect of us?” That’s the question Jesus is working on, here. It’s not an especially popular question--I know that—because we live in a culture that would rather ask what God has done for us, right? (Or, more likely, “What’s God done for me, lately?”). But Jesus doesn’t apologize for the question. (And I need to be sure you don’t misunderstand, here--Jesus is not talking about enabling chronic abusers--he’s not talking about the kind of co-dependent behavior that allows another person to persist in self-destruction, or manipulation, or violence. Other places in Scripture he’s clear that there are situations in relationships where love must be tough--even confrontational. And if you’ve ever been in a relationship like that--or if you’re in one now--my prayer is that you’ll ask for help--that you’ll find a trustworthy person that can help you discern whether this is a moment for resistant or non-resistant love, because sometimes it’s hard to know which is which, that’s true…)

But for those of us trying to figure out a Christ-like response to an enemy--to somebody difficult to love--Jesus is calling us to something higher and stronger and more radical than our natural, human inclinations. He says, *If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” lend to “sinners,” expecting to be repaid. But love your enemies--do good to them--and lend to them without expecting anything back—for then your reward will be great--you’ll be most like the sons and daughters of God--because God will take responsibility for what happens to the unrighteous…* Can we trust God on this one?

Ever done something like that—given to somebody who can’t repay you? Or to somebody who’d do you a measure harm if they could? That’s the love of Jesus—the radical love of Jesus. He gave us something that we can never repay, and then asks us to give like he gives. Really? Really. As Frederick Buechner once put it:

* *The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, of brother or sister for brother or sister—it’s to love what is loving and lovely; and the world smiles…*
* *The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, for the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.*
* *The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich. And the world is always bewildered by its saints.*
* *But then there is love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you, but who mocks, threatens, or hurts. This is God’s love, and it conquers the world…[[2]](#footnote-2)*

So, here’s a prayer I’ve caught myself praying in my driveway--sitting in my car before leaving on a trip--maybe you’ve prayed this one, too: “Lord, I pray for safety as I travel--pray nobody gets hurt--keep me safe ‘til I get back...” Our words might vary a bit, but it’s pretty much what we pray before leaving on vacation, a business trip, whatever, right? It’s because we are consumed with safety--obsessed with it, even. And don’t get me wrong—I’m not saying we should never pray for God’s protection, but where along the way did that become our highest priority? How did it happen that we have elevated safety to the neglect of whatever God’s best is, or whatever would bring God the most glory, or whatever would accomplish God’s purposes in our lives and in the world? Might you and I be willing to pray this prayer instead: “God, bring me closer to you today, whatever it takes, and give me the courage to live into your promise for me—that together we really can do all things—even seemingly impossible things—like loving somebody we don’t think we can love--through you who strengthens me…” Can we believe that God might just be big enough to take us places we don’t think we can go? It’s a little like that old African saying, (that): “If you think you’re too small to make a difference, try spending the night in a tent with a mosquito.” Maybe, just maybe, God has decided that you and I are not too small to love in a way that conquers the world. Do you think?

1. I am indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon on the love of one’s enemies for her insights into this text and for a measure of the content of this sermon. See *God In Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering,* pp. 37-40 (Abingdon Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat,* p. 105 (Harper & Row, 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)