

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

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Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Matthew 5:38-48

So, were you paying attention when I was reading the Gospel lesson? Did you hear what Jesus was teaching? Surely, he didn't really mean it... no one can live like that! Turn the other cheek? Refuse no one who begs from you and love your enemy? Be perfect like God?

I have to admit that whenever I read this particular lesson there is part of me desperately searching for a way to make it a bit easier. Surely, Jesus is describing a set of values to which his disciples should aspire but which are truly unobtainable in this life. These must be the perfect goals that we work towards in bettering ourselves. Or maybe Jesus is just saying all this to reveal the impossibility of human righteousness, for we clearly can do no good without God's grace. Or maybe he is only saying this to his disciples and not really expecting this of us. I mean, those guys must be more holy, if for no other reason that because they have been right there with Jesus.

Or, even better, maybe this teaching is not really so much about how we are supposed to live in perfect love (which looks a lot like perfect surrender in giving), but instead Jesus is teaching nonviolent means of resistance against injustice, especially for those who are oppressed. I've read a number of scholars who have made this convincing argument. They say that to strike someone on the right cheek refers to a backhanded slap, which is more an insulting and shaming act than a particularly injurious one. To turn the other cheek would require striking it with a fist, which is to acknowledge the other person as an equal rather than an inferior, thus denying the aggressor's power to humiliate another.

Scholars note that Jewish men at the time wore two garments: a wool tunic with a heavier cloak over it. While the law provided protections for one's cloak so that it may not be used as security for a loan, Jesus teaches that if you are sued for the tunic, you should also give up the cloak. And by giving up both garments, the defendant brings shame upon the other by forcing him to look upon your nakedness.

Roman law allowed soldiers to force citizens into service as porters (remember Simon of Cyrene who was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus?), but they could only be required to carry items for one mile. By going the second mile, oppressed people can protest the injustice of this law and put the aggressor in violation of it.

Yes, these explanations are much better...they make these lessons of Jesus much more palatable. Even so, while they may be true, they are still incomplete and only reveal part of message. To stop here would be an effective way to find well-crafted loopholes around the audacity of Jesus' teaching and the way he invites his disciples to follow.

Unfortunately, I have bad news for you today. You're not going to like this. I think Jesus means *exactly* what he says. He really means it... seriously. Jesus, indeed, is calling us to a life of nonretaliation and love. He wants us to go the extra mile, surrender what is demanded, and give away anything to those who beg. He wants us to see our common humanity in those who persecute us and respond in love and prayer. He wants us to be perfect as God is perfect. And lest we delude ourselves otherwise, near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (7:21) You see, in Matthew's Gospel, to follow Jesus is to do what he says.

Jesus makes a theological argument that goes something like this: disciples are to love their neighbors and their enemies just as they love themselves. In this way, disciples imitate God and become children of God, as God himself blesses the righteous and unrighteous without distinction. This, in fact, is the mark of discipleship, that one imitates God: be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Jesus calls us to be perfect imitators of God's ways.

We, in this time however, tend to get hung up on the word "perfect". For the most part, we use the word now to refer to something that is flawless and entirely without defect. Achieving perfection defined in this way is not only impossible but also seems to be in opposition to the very nature of creation, at least since the Fall. But the word "perfect" here means fully formed or mature, like a fully ripe fruit. For Jesus, human life fully formed is one that is an interpretation of God's righteousness and justice, in human scale. In this sense, to be "perfect" is to be true – true to who we have been made to be and true to our intended relationship with God and others, even our enemies.

Thankfully, understanding Jesus' call to be perfect like God in this way also suggests that this is a process – that perfection is something we achieve rather than a prerequisite. To be perfect is not a state of being, rather it is something we do. And through the doing – through the imitation of God's ways – we will find our hearts transformed. And praise be to God for that. The way of Jesus is the way of transformation – of becoming the beloved children of God that we were created to be; living lives of love, justice, and mercy. The gulf between who I am now and who I want to be, who God has created me to be, has always seemed too broad and too deep to bridge. My spirit too weak and my heart too hard. But God gives us the path... and Jesus shows us what it looks like to be godlike in a human way.

In 12-step recovery groups, there is a saying: You can't think yourself into right action; you act yourself into right thinking. Righteous action not only is good and sows the seeds of God's love in a hurting world, but it is also transformative. Acting in righteously and imitating the ways of God can change the state of the world as well as the state of our own hearts.

This, of course, is the purpose of the Mosaic Law. Following the Torah provides the essential road map and is the beginning. But Jesus calls us to wade into even deeper waters, for the ultimate goal is to have the law written upon our hearts – this is to live the Law of Love. Not merely to follow the letter of the law in our actions, but to live the law in such a way as to inhabit the spirit of the Law and be perfect imitators of God's ways.

As Jesus points out, the key to all of this is love. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus makes clear that the deepest intention of the will of God is love, love toward God, neighbor, and even one's enemy. Fulfilling the law is an exercise of love, translated into justice, compassion, and faith. In the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in our lesson today, Jesus teaches us that love is the perfect response...always and in every situation. The love to which Jesus calls us is understood not simply as affection...this love is expressed through actions, in the sense of willing the good for another. In all five of the examples Jesus provides in our lesson today, love governs the disciples' response, at the expense of individual rights and prerogatives.

We may not always be able (or willing) to feel perfect love, but we can act in loving ways – ways that reflect God's nature. In this way, love is not only our destination but also our means of getting there. Through love, or even merely loving acts, we enter the fullness of life and allow God's grace to flow through us and transform us. Over time, our hearts are more fully formed and become the deep wells from which the living waters of love, justice, and mercy are sourced, allowing us to live fully human lives which bear more perfectly the image of God.

Yes, the bad news I bring today is that Jesus really does mean exactly what he says, and being his disciples means we follow in his ways and do as he teaches. True discipleship demands wholehearted devotion to God and love that goes beyond what is required. The good news is that through the incarnation of God in Christ, we are shown what it looks like to live the law of love of in the world. Following the way of Jesus, we learn how to be perfect bearers of God's image and imitators of God's ways. And when we are wholehearted in our devotion, we find ourselves enjoying the fullness of eternal life in God.

Amen.