

## “Loving Our Enemies”

Matthew 5: 38-48

We are picking back up with the Gospel of Matthew. In reading this text, one thing to keep in mind is that it is part of a larger section. This is only a part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. If we remember, the Sermon on the Mount is the moment when Jesus gathers his disciples, along with the crowd that has been following him, Jesus gathers them all together and begins to teach them. He begins to teach them about the Kingdom of God.

We have to keep in mind that while looking at this section, Matthew has been setting us up from the very beginning of his Gospel for just this moment. Matthew has been preparing us for this new era that Jesus is ushering in. This new era reflects a radical difference in God’s relationship with the human community. God is now with the people, living among them, teaching them, preaching to them.

I have to tell you that when I was picking out Scriptures, I wanted to avoid the actual lectionary text for this Sunday. It too is a part of the Sermon on the Mount. But it deals with divorce, adultery and murder among other things. I did this because that particular text is way too complicated to even try to deal with in a twenty minute sermon.

So I chose what I thought would be a “safer” Scripture for today but after living with this text, and actually realizing what it is calls us to do, I am once again reminded that being a follower of Jesus Christ is not about safe Scriptures or comfort zones. It is about doing something other than business as usual in our broken and hurt world. Being a follower of Jesus Christ is about living out a reversal of values, a reversal that forces us put aside what the world values, things like power and might and instead embrace what the Kingdom of God values, things like love and grace. And, in case we had forgotten, not once in all of Jesus’ ministry, did he ever tell us this reversal of values would be easy or safe.

So with that being said, let us take a look again at our text and see what it is really calling us to do as followers of Jesus Christ.

We start with this section about turning the other cheek. Let’s be honest, we read these words and we begin to wonder just what exactly did we sign up for when we agreed to take Jesus as our Lord and Savior. This section doesn’t make any sense. It calls us to offer our other cheek to be slapped. It tells us to give away our shirt and our coat. It even tells us to go the extra mile for the ones who force us to go the first.

This section doesn’t make a lot of sense to us as modern-day disciples. And yes, at some point or another, we have all heard attempts that try to help this

passage make sense for us. However, I think it needs to be said, that in some cases, these attempts that try to help this text make sense have created considerable damage, that this text has been used to cause more harm than help.

Here's why I say that: I have heard this text lifted up time and time again as justification for people to stay in abusive situations. I have also heard this text being lifted up to explain why Christians are called to be passive and not protest against the wrongs of the world.

Now, all these attempts to help this passage make sense have not been all bad. Because I have also heard some sermons explaining away the differences in the reading of this text, with a nod to the time periods that separate us from the original audience. These sermons say things like Jesus was speaking to the Jewish court system and to the Roman law. Some of these sermons have gone on to say that with the Jewish courts, if a person was ordered to give his shirt to someone and he also gave his coat, then that other person would be shamed. The other person would be made to look bad. The negative attention would be drawn away from the first person and turned on the other. Or I have heard it said that if a Roman soldier forced a person to walk a mile in service but he walked two, then that Roman soldier would be shamed. That Roman soldier would become the object of negativity, not the person forced into servitude.

I have heard all these things used to explain this passage. Yet I have to also say that too many times, a lot of these explanations left a lot to be desired for me. They left me more confused than ever before. Because you see, I could never understand why Jesus wanted to shame others. Not once did he do that in his ministry. Sure, he rebuked the Pharisees and yes even his own disciples on occasion but not once did he ever intentionally set out to put others down. And since we are being honest with each other, I'll also share that I could never reconcile the God whom I had experienced and known in my life, a God of love and grace, with a God who would be okay with abuse in any form. That was just not the God I knew in my life or in my faith.

Thankfully, someone finally explained to me that the NRSV doesn't do the best job of translating the Greek in this text. Jesus is not telling his followers after they have been hit, to then say, "please, Sir, may I have another?"

What Jesus is actually telling his disciples to do is to not respond violently to their oppressor. He is telling his disciples, he is telling the crowd that in situations where others hurt them, in situations where others bring violence, the proper response is a response of non-violence, a response of non-violence that reverses values, this time replacing acts intended for harm with acts for the good. In other words, when they go low, we go high.

When verse 38 and 39 are read in this context of this reversal of values, we realize that Jesus is telling his disciples, is telling the crowd that hate and violence should not be what defines their words, should not be what dictates their behavior. Instead rather, their words, their behaviors, their actions, their relationships with others should be patterned on the very character of their God, a God who since the beginning of time has shown us that God is steadfast in God's love, that God is generous with grace, that God is faithful from generation to generation.

Jesus is calling for a reversal of values as a way for his disciples to overcome evil with good, as a way for his disciples to overcome evil with love.

We know how to do this. We do this through peaceful protests. We do this by feeding the hungry. We do this by welcoming the stranger. We do this by not judging others based on the color of their skin, or their sexual orientation or even by their ideologies. We overcome evil with love by being in true authentic relationship with all God's children. We overcome evil with good by inviting someone of differing opinions to have a conversation, not on Facebook, but in person, face to face, over a cup of coffee or by breaking bread with them so that we can get to know them as a person, as a human being beyond our assumptions.

Now, once again, let me be clear, Jesus never promised this whole discipleship was going to be easy but it is what we signed up for when we embraced Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Which brings me to another part of this text, a part that has always bothered me. That word “perfect” in verse 48. Do you know how hard it is to be perfect? But there it is in black and white... “As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to be perfect like God is perfect.”

Or so I thought until again someone way smarter than me told me that perfect in this text does not mean what we think it means. Perfect here is not a call to be “holier than thou” in our words, actions, with us going around thinking we are better than everyone else.

Sure we are called to do things like love our enemies and pattern our words and actions on the character of God. We just talked about that.

But when it comes to that word, “perfect”, Jesus isn’t telling us to be without fault. That would be impossible. We are human. Jesus knows that. God knows that. If we were perfect and not in need of God’s grace, than that whole God coming down to Earth to be with us, to teach us, would be pointless.

Believe me God knows we are not perfect. God kind of figured that out a long time ago with that whole Adam and Eve thing of them eating the fruit after God told them not to do so.

What Jesus is calling for in this text is for us as his disciples to be perfect in the sense of complete or made whole. He wants us to understand that God is constantly working in this world to reconcile humanity with God and with one another. And as follower of Jesus, we are called to do the same. We are to work for wholeness for all of God's children by living out God's love, living out God's grace in our relationships, through our words, through our actions with all of God's children, and not just with the ones we like.

Like I said, no one ever said being disciple of Jesus was going to be easy but this is exactly what we signed up for when we embraced Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

How do I know this...once again, it took someone way smarter than me to help me figure this out...This past week, a preacher who I greatly admired shared that in her church, she decided that instead of breaking Jesus' Sermon on the Mount into individual pieces to be read on consecutive Sundays during the month of February, that she would instead read it as a whole for her sermon. She is a lot braver than I am. Because she didn't edited it or leave any of the uncomfortable

pieces out. She read it all...2 chapters of Jesus' very own words, read aloud as her sermon.

This preacher knew what she was risking when she read certain pieces. After all, she serves a prestigious church. A church that takes lots of resources to operate. She also knew that she would make people mad by not going with a safer Scripture, by not going with a Scripture that allows people to leave the church service feeling good about themselves and their place in the world.

This preacher knew what she was risking when she stepped into that pulpit and read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount-complete, as a whole, with nothing left out.

And sure enough, after the worship services were over that day, several people came up to her and shared that they really didn't like or agree with some of her sermon that morning. Now again, let me remind us. She read 2 chapters of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, not her words, Jesus' words.

And here is what I love. She responded to these people as pastorally as she could and said, "I'm sure that when Jesus came down from the mount after giving his sermon, several people also told him that they didn't like or agree with some of what he said that day. Because Jesus' very words flew in the face of the Middle Eastern culture to which they were accustomed. Jesus' very words would not allow his disciples nor would it allow the crowd gathered around him to go about



business as usual in their broken and hurting world. So I can only surmise that Jesus looked at this disciples, looked at the people who didn't like what he was saying, Jesus looked at them in the eye as he certainly would us and say, "Yes, that's the point".

May we always find the strength and the courage to embrace the reversal of values being ushered in by the Kingdom of God and may we always find ways to overcome evil with good. Amen.