

Be Perfect

Matthew 5: 38-48

This is the text that the preacher doesn't look forward to for many reasons.

One reason being is that we have all heard sermons on the background of this particular text. We have heard how if someone slapped the other cheek after hitting the first one, then that was an insult because the slap had to be a back handed slap. And everyone knew in Jesus' day, that the back handed slap was no good. And people have interpreted this action as way for people of faith to act non-violently to the powers that be.

We have also heard how Roman soldiers used to forcibly make people carry their items and the allotted distance was a mile. And in this context, we have heard other sermons describing how by suggesting that the person go the extra mile, this in turn would reflect badly on the other party, leading to another insult. Once again, this has been interpreted as a way to respond non-violently to the powers that be.

We have also heard sermons that tell us when Jesus is talking about giving the cloak away as well, that once again this would reflect badly on the other party because that party has taken the one thing the Law doesn't permit him to take,

leaving the one party basically naked in court, again another insult, again another way of non-violent resistance.

We have heard sermons that have been given to us with all this background numerous of times. And the challenge for the preacher is saying something new about this passage but maybe more importantly, the challenge that worries the preacher more than that is interpreting how people will hear this particular part of the text.

Throughout history, this text has been used to keep people in horrible abusive situations because we've all been told that it means non-violent resistance, it means being passive, it means being submissive because that is exactly what Jesus wants us as people of faith to do.

Even that message for those of us who have not been in situations like that, interpret it to mean that we are supposed to be doormats and let people walk all over us, letting them do whatever because Jesus said that we should turn the other check, and go the extra mile.

A frustrating message indeed and not all good news for us as people of faith. And all the more reasons for why preachers like to avoid this text as often as they can.

Another reason that many preachers don't look forward to this text is that whole part about "loving your enemies." No one likes to do that. We are used to

Jesus saying Love our neighbors and that is actually easy. We know who our neighbors are. We know that our neighbors can be just about anybody and that makes it safe because really we know our neighbors include people that we really like and in general other people, people who are nameless and faceless to us, people we have no real connection with, people who we have no real relationship with yet, thus making them easy to like well, because if we are honest with ourselves, they aren't taking up our time and energy and they haven't done anything to make us mad just yet.

Loving our neighbors is easy but in this passage, Jesus asks us to love our enemies. Now that is difficult. How can we love people who have wronged us, hurt us, broken our trust, or who are getting on our last nerve? If we are honest with ourselves, we would rather just write that person off and forget about them completely rather than love them. Or if we were really honest with ourselves, we would probably rather be angry with that person and give them the evil eyes every time we saw them rather than try to forgive them and repair the relationship.

Once again a frustrating message indeed and not all good news for us as people of faith. And all the more reasons for why preachers like to avoid this text as often as they can.

All pretty good reasons so far for why preachers really don't like to preach on this text but probably the main reason why preachers don't like to preach on this text is the one line: "Be Perfect." Jesus asks the impossible. How can we be perfect when we know already that we are imperfect? This is when we start to really get frustrated with Jesus in this text. He asks the impossible. No one is perfect. We begin to wonder if Jesus is setting us up to fail from the very beginning and we wonder why would he do that? Doesn't he want us to grow in faith and to grow in our relationship with God, not attempt the impossible and fail miserably? We begin to wonder if Jesus really knows and understands what he is asking us- only God is perfect and he is asking us to perfect like God.

Once again, a frustrating message indeed and not all good news for us as people of faith. And all the more reasons for why preachers like to avoid this text as often as they can.

You see all these are pretty good reasons for preachers to not like this text. We could easily skip the sermon today, move onto communion and leave a little early today. But the author of Matthew wouldn't have included it as part of Jesus' preaching if this text didn't have something to say to us as people of faith, even if we don't like what it is asking us to do.

For us to do that, we need to hear the word perfect from the viewpoint of faith and grace, not from our worldly view point. When Jesus is talking about

being perfect, he is not talking about being well, perfect in everything. He is not talking about not having flaws. He is not talking about not being completely right every time. He is not talking about being wonderful, or the greatest in everything that we do.

When Jesus uses the term perfect, he is talking more in terms of completion, more in terms of maturity, more in terms of growing in wisdom and faith. When Jesus is talking about being perfect, he is telling us to be complete, to allow ourselves to be made whole through God. By asking us to be perfect, Jesus is inviting us to look at our behaviors in a new way, through the way of peace, through the way of grace, through the way of compassion, and yes through the way of love, and not just any love, but the love that was first shown to us by God, a love that knows no boundaries, no limits, no ifs and or buts.

Jesus is asking us to live according to the way God has treated and loved us. And when we do this, many things that are okay according to this world's standards are not okay according to the standards of the Kingdom of God. Jesus, in this text, is asking the disciples to replace the mentality of this world: "Do unto others as they have done unto you with 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'"

Jesus is asking his disciples and us today to remember that when this world tells us that it is okay to strike back, that is okay for us to hate, that is okay for us to

harm those that have harmed us, that that lifestyle is “inconsistent with living by the beatitudes that precede this text, a life in which one is meek, merciful, peacemaking, and willing to suffer for righteousness' sake,” A life that calls us to live and become the people that God created us to be, a life that calls us to center ourselves in God’s grace and God’s goodness and trust that God is in control.

The Good news for us as people of faith this morning!

When Jesus asks us to do all these things, we must understand that Jesus knows that we are not able to do all these things on our own. That is why he teaches us a few short verses later how to pray to God, how to ask for strength, how to ask for patience, and yes how to ask for forgiveness when we fall short. Jesus knows that what he is asking us is not logical, it is not reasonable, it doesn’t make sense according to how this world works.

And that is exactly why he asks us to do it because we are called to be perfect, to be made whole, to become complete, to grow in wisdom and faith, to reflect the love that God has shown us.

Jesus is not asking us to be doormats. Jesus is not asking us to allow others to have power over us. Jesus is not asking us to even be cowards by not fighting back.

What Jesus is asking us to do is to allow ourselves to be transformed by God’s grace and God’s peace. What Jesus is asking us to do is realize that God

loves everyone, the good, the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous. What Jesus is asking us to do is to be perfect: complete, whole, healed, forgiven. Because that is the behavior that permeates the Kingdom of God shown to us by the example of Jesus Christ when even as he was dying on the cross, some of his last words were, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

We are called to be more, to do more. We are called to live our lives by God’s standards, not worldly standards. We are called to be the people that God created us to be: perfect, healed, whole, complete. And when we become perfect, we begin to live out the principles and examples that were taught and shown to us by Jesus Christ. We begin to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. We begin to understand the transformative power of God’s love even more. We begin to experience even more the blessing that is God’s grace. We begin to experience even more the wonderful release that is forgiveness. We begin to live life the way that God intended it to be for us as God’s children: perfect.

Surely, the best news that we can be given as people of faith.

May we be perfect and become the people that God created us to be: healed, whole, complete. Amen.