

February 23, 2014

Matthew 5:38-48

Lev. 19:1-2, 9-18

“Perfection?”

When I was young and in school, there were lots of fights, usually but not always between two boys. When a fight broke out, some adult would step in and separate the two, and then there was always the whining cry, “He hit me first...” or “She stole my...” or “He was looking at me funny.” It was always the other person’s fault. I’m sure most of you have seen the same, because for some reason we human beings seem more comfortable with striking out than we do with showing love and mercy.

Images are broadcast on the evening news each night of people striking out and hitting back, in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Venezuela and several other locations, and now, this week, in the Ukraine. Once again, our government and the United Nations must figure out how to respond to the heart-breaking violence, retaliations that fill cities with fear, with orphans, with increased hatred. In the face of all that is tearing up our world, near and far, I can hear Jesus say, firmly, “If you make someone your enemy, you also need to make him/her/them the recipient of your love and your prayers.” ... What do we do with Jesus’ teachings in this get-even, justify your attitudes about somebody, world?

A lot of attention was turned this month towards Florida, where a man was on trial for “standing his ground” back in 2012. Four youths were in a vehicle in front of a convenience store, and loud music was emanating from it. This man complained about the decibels. He then felt threatened, he said, so he reached into his glove compartment and fired ten shots into the car, as it sped off. One seventeen year old in the car was shot dead. I guess that man heard “stand your ground” more clearly than he heard Jesus’ teaching from Matthew 5.

If ever there were a scripture that shows us just how far short of God's expectations we fall, it is the one from today’s Gospel where Jesus challenged us to love even our enemies and to let people pretty much walk over us. Then he topped these tough teachings with his summary statement: “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The passage we just heard from Leviticus doesn’t make it much easier as it declares: “You shall be holy; for I, the Lord your God, I am holy.”

After hearing today’s gospel lesson, somebody once quipped, "Love my enemies? --If I loved them, they wouldn't be enemies!" (Source unknown)

The eminent preacher, Fred B. Craddock, told how he preached from today’s Gospel lesson in 1996 for the opening sermon at the brand-new Cherry Log Christian Church in Georgia, and how afterwards a man came to him and told him what a mistake he had made using that scripture. “Bad choice,” the man said. Craddock replied, “Well, those were words of Jesus.” And the man said, “Well, there are a lot of words in the Bible that are out of keeping with the spirit of our time. It’s just out of touch. What people expect of the church now-a-days is not a lot of talk about cross-bearing and loving enemies, they want to come to church to feel better, to be part of a group that will help them be successful. In a case or two maybe some therapy but otherwise,

we get together mutually to enjoy each other, so knock off the ‘ought’ and ‘must’ and ‘should.’... It sets the bar too high. If you keep doing it, you’ll never have a church.” (*The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, p. 156) Of course, the man was wrong. The Cherry Log church became a vital congregation.

Craddock went on to talk about how, where Jesus warned that if you love only folks who love you, you miss out on any credit, and how the word in the New Testament Greek that is translated as “credit” or “reward” is translated as “grace” in other places in the New Testament. I quote Craddock: “What grace is that? If you love those who love you, where’s the ‘grace’? If you do good to those who do good to you, where’s the grace? If you lend to those who lend to you, where’s the grace?” (P. 157) (Reminds me of the old “Where’s the beef” commercial.)

Craddock went on: “I remember shortly before our service on that Sunday in 1996, I was down at the post office in Blue Ridge and some prisoners were working on the sidewalk. You could tell by their stripes that they were prisoners. There was a guard with two guns. They were finishing up their work on the sidewalk and when I came out I noticed how nice it was and I said, ‘Thank you, fellows, it looks real nice. You did a good job.’ And the guard said, ‘You don’t thank them; they’re prisoners.’ It’s hard to be gracious in a world like ours. (P. 158, *Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*)

We all have personally had times and places where the last thing in the world we felt like doing was to be gracious to somebody who was unloving to us. It’s hard. Even so, God knows that we *can* do these things; that’s why we are here today. We are called to be different, because we have chosen to let our Savior Jesus Christ be Lord of our lives. The God who created us and who knows everything about us also knows that our deepest peace and well-being will be achieved when we trust God *so much* that we dare go against our basic inclinations and instead risk doing what Jesus did and what he told us to do. Serve God, not the opinions of others, and not the norm of our get-even society. There is much power in giving what seems to be “power” up because of one’s radical faith and trust in the way of Jesus.

Baptist preacher/professor Tony Campolo shared an experience then-President Bill Clinton had when he first met Nelson Mandela, who was then the leader of South Africa. Clinton said: “When you were released from prison, Mr. Mandela, I woke my daughter at three o’clock in the morning. I wanted her to see this historic event. As you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. That’s not the Nelson Mandela I know today. What was that all about?”

Mandela answered, “I am surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the cameras caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, *They’ve taken everything from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they’re releasing you, but there’s nothing left for you out there.* And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me, ‘Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don’t allow them

to make you into a free man, only to turn you into their prisoner!’ And Campolo reminded us, “An unforgiving spirit creates bitterness in our souls and imprisons our spirits. A failure to forgive imprisons us.” (*Let me Tell You A Story*, Tony Campolo, pp. 66-67) And of course we know that God had all kinds of powerful possibilities and work for Nelson Mandela to do, once he was freed from his hatred.

Keep in mind as we wrestle with Jesus' teachings that we are *not* being asked to do any more than Jesus did or than God has done throughout history as God's people have consistently turned away from God and failed to take God seriously. Some of you have heard the story that one day Abraham invited a beggar to his tent for a meal. While grace was being said, the man began to curse God, declaring he could not bear to hear God's name. Seized with indignation, Abraham drove the blasphemer away. Later, when Abraham was saying his evening prayers, God chastised him: "This man has cursed and reviled me for fifty years and yet I have given him food to eat every day. Could you not put up with him for a single meal?"

Who are we to draw boundaries around love? God has put up with an imperfect humanity for thousands of years, in spite of our apathy and our failure to love. William Barclay's definition of love may help us see what God has done for us: "The real meaning of love is unconquerable benevolence. If we regard a person with love, it means that nothing that that person can or will ever do will make us seek anything but his/her highest good." By giving us these hard teachings concerning love, God is seeking our own good, our freedom, even though the teachings don't seem to make much sense when held in the light of the conventional wisdom of our day.

The “wisdom” of our society would tell us to be reasonable with people, but not to go overboard. It would suggest that one must stand up for one's rights and declare that bullying should never be tolerated. It would encourage folks to pretty much be truthful and of integrity, but not to be pushovers when it comes to others who may manipulate and try to borrow money or give you some sob story. Be strong and discreet and don't look vulnerable.

But then, in the darkness of bad news and bullies and retaliation and grudges, light shines. Somebody makes a meal for an unfriendly neighbor. Somebody reaches across the ditch of a long-held grudge. Somebody forgives a terrible wrong that can never be made right. And light shines in the darkness and prisoners of resentment are freed.

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” With this phrase echoing in our ears and our hearts, we face a choice, every day, as to what we choose to do with Jesus' teachings. But we must remember one thing: These teachings were totally real for Jesus, especially as he was nailed to the cross... His choice can give us hope, life, challenge and blessing today and forever.

May God give each of us wisdom as to what to do with Jesus' hard teachings and the reading from Leviticus. By the grace of God, may we hear and understand what it means for us to love, for us to love and pray for our enemies. May we learn to risk the way of love more than avoid it; and may our daily commitment to follow Jesus be part of the story of the whole world finally being restored through God's love. Amen.