

Epiphany 7A. February 19, 2017. Matthew 5:38-48.

Christians around the country today are hearing the most learned sermons they've ever heard from their preachers. Preachers who normally rely on sports metaphors are suddenly informing their congregations of the intricacies of ancient Palestinian honor codes. Preachers who normally bring the text to life by citing the behavior of their children or reminding everyone of a popular tv show are instead doing the hard exegetical yards of delineating the use in koine Greek of the genitive case as against the vocative. That cloud you may have seen scuttling across the prairie sky about Friday afternoon was the dust from forgotten commentaries as we preachers rushed to find something, *anything* that would let us assure you that Jesus didn't really mean it.

I don't mean to take cheap shots at my friends, colleagues, and self, but just to point out the overwhelming temptation to make the Sermon on the Mount something that increases our comfort. I feel it too. But this morning I want us to have the courage to act as if Jesus really said what he meant, and that the text really means what it says.

All of that digging through commentaries of course wasn't a waste of time and if we couple it to the courage to listen, rather than explain away, then we can better understand this passage. To do that well, we need to avoid the mistake of taking these verses as a series of disconnected aphorisms, instead of a coherent stream of connected thoughts. In fact, that stream begins all the way back at the beginning of this chapter with the Beatitudes, which you may remember us reading a few weeks ago. Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and us when we are reviled and persecuted because of Jesus. First, we are blessed—and then these hard verses lay out what it means to live into that blessed life. Being blessed doesn't necessarily mean having an easy life.

Similarly, when we read this verse about not resisting an evildoer, we should take it seriously, but we have to keep reading. This is not a call to abet evildoers, to stay out of their way and make it easier. The list of deeds that come after the command describe how we are to fulfill it: by turning the other cheek, giving away our clothes, walking an extra mile, and giving to all beggars and would-be money borrowers. I think that Jesus is calling us fundamentally to refuse to join the pattern of violence and oppression and instead to reset all of our relationships along the lines of mutuality and godly love. It is a call to determine our character and conduct according to the God we serve, not the enemies we face.

Turning the other cheek, then, is refusing to respond to violence with violence—which also disempowers the aggressor, who is seeking escalation. And even more than that, it refuses to accept a grounding for a relationship that is incompatible with love. Giving away your cloak to someone who is suing you for your coat undoes the adversarial relationship of opponents in a legal case. The example of going the extra mile refers to a Roman law that any soldier of the occupying army could compel a native to carry their burden for a mile. A person who goes the second mile refuses to be defined by the ways in which we are oppressed. And giving away money every chance we get is a gesture towards refusing to be defined by the ways in which we benefit from other people's oppression.

These aren't strategies for winning against an evildoer, and this is really the hard part. They are strategies for remaining faithful in a world where we are beset and tempted

by injustice on all sides. And this isn't really a four point step-by-step guide to becoming a disciple. These are examples that illustrate a basic way of being in the world—people whose purpose is defined by God, not the temporary struggles in which they find themselves. And so, naturally, they don't first achieve a transfer of physical and political power, but a kind of people who are free in the deepest sense from the powers and principalities that misshape our humanity. And only then is a different kind of society possible.

The word “love” gets a lot of flack from those in the know. And indeed we have too often used it to mean nothing more than “feel affection if possible and don't kill.” The love of enemies that Jesus is calling us to in this passage is something much more radical and difficult. It isn't a way of comfortably avoiding conflict—it is a way of overcoming violent conflict the way Jesus overcame death and the grave: by going through them and exposing their final emptiness. And the only way that we can possibly do this is if we are, indeed, perfect. So, okay, I guess we're off the hook anyway.

But hold on. I'm not going to water this down, but I am going to round it out. The word translated as “be perfect” here is *teleioi*—no no, stick with me—which is derived from *telos*, which means goal, ultimate object, or aim. Some translations render this passage “be complete as your heavenly father is complete.” The sense is “live as you were meant to live,” live as God created you to live, blessed and within loving community. Live according to your purpose, not according to your immediate environment. This doesn't mean to ignore what's going on in the world, but it does mean not to be defined by our enemies, not even to let our relationship with our enemies be defined by their hatred of us.

I think that the only way we can live in this way is by living not toward, but from perfection, from completion. In short, to see our home as that kingdom of heaven that draws near but is not yet fully here. To see ourselves as children of God fully redeemed and being saved. Of course our “perfection” won't be particularly perfect. What I'm trying to say here is that the command to be perfect is not so much about a directive to achieve perfection as it is an invitation to receive the true meaning of our lives as a gift.

The *telos*, the point, the goal of life, that which makes us perfect and complete is a gift given to us by God just as the blessings of the Beatitudes are. It is not so much the end of Christian life as it is the beginning, the place we start from. God blesses us into a new way of being and this is what it looks like to live from that way of being. Only when we act as if God's blessings and promises are true are we capable of turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile. Only then can we do more than just change who misuses power and how—we can participate with God in building a new way of being together in which power is always for, rather than over. What looks like terribly difficult strictures is rooted always, deeply, profoundly in blessings.