

Scripture Reading:
Matthew 5:38-48

The Light of Love

Some texts seem too difficult to preach. Not difficult for us as interpreters, but rather too difficult for people to hear and to bear. This is one definitely of those texts. It is hard for all of us when we are in the 'thick of it.' to just love and so "I think a lot of us probably have one of two reactions to this passage and the (in)famous commands it contains. The first is simple, and a little sad: we've heard Jesus' commands so often that they hardly register. "Turn the other cheek." *Yeah -- yawn -- sure.* "Love you enemies." *Sounds nice -- why not?* And out of our trained indifference we rarely think deeply about actually trying to follow them.

The second response takes Jesus' words more seriously, but also assumes they're somewhat out of reach. "Turn the other cheek." *Are you kidding?! And get treated like a doormat?* "Love you enemies." *You can't be serious!* Both commands -- and a host of Jesus' other injunctions to boot, seem from this point of view to be sheer folly, idealistic sentiments that would be crazy to apply in the "real" world.

But here's the thing: Jesus isn't kidding and is dead serious about these commands. In this sermon, Jesus is outlining his vision of God's kingdom and issuing a summons to those who desire to be a part of it. Which is why we need to take them seriously. Of course, if such sentiments seem a little crazy to us, we're not alone. Critics from the extreme right and left have often characterized Jesus' teaching as ludicrous. Consider Ayn Rand, political philosopher, literary bestseller, and recent darling of the Tea Party, who wrote, "If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject." And then there's Karl Marx, father of communism, who said, "The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness."

Before dismissing these critiques too quickly, however, we should perhaps point out that, indeed, turning the other cheek and returning hatred with love is *not a* way to get ahead in this world. For the rules of *this* kingdom are well known -- it's a dog-eat-dog world where only the strong survive. *But that's just the point.* Jesus isn't trying to modify the rules of the world. He's not, contrary to prosperity preachers, inviting you to figure out how to make the most of this world or have your best life now. And he's not even inviting you to find a safe port amid the storms of this world. Rather, he's starting a revolution by calling the rules of this world into question and, at the very same time, redeeming this world that he loves and that will, in due time, put him to death.

Jesus calls the powers of the day into question by describing an entirely different way to relate to each other, inviting us into relationships governed not by power but by vulnerability grounded in

love. “‘An eye for an eye’ makes all people blind,” Gandhi would similarly say almost two thousand years later. Here Jesus invites us to overcome the urge to retribution with loving submission and forbearance.

Yet he isn't satisfied with merely overturning this world. For the very essence of his critique -- that we were created not merely for justice but also for love and life -- is simultaneously the only possible hope for those enmeshed in the orders of the world. Strength eventually fails. Power corrupts. And survival of the fittest leaves so many bodies on the ground. Love alone transforms, redeems, and creates new life. As Martin Luther King, Jr., a student of both Jesus and Gandhi, once said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” *Turning on the love light is the only way we will glimpse the kingdom.*

So if we are inclined to read over these familiar words too quickly in our haste to get on with the familiar story, or if we want to dismiss these commands out of hand as pious idealisms, I'd urge us instead to slow down and take them more seriously. For in these few crazy sentiments Jesus lays before us the plans for the kingdom he proclaims and the revolution he starts. And so before joining either, we should probably know just what it is we're getting ourselves in for!

As we do so, however, allow one more observation. The last line of this passage -- “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” -- helps to reframe the whole of this passage. For while *telos*, the Greek word Jesus employs, can indeed be translated “perfect,” it typically denotes something not so much morally perfect as it does something that has grown up, matured, and now reached its perfect end. That is, *telos* is the goal or desired outcome of a thing. A fruit tree's *telos*, we might say, is to grow mature and tall so that it can bear fruit.

So might Jesus be not simply *commanding* something of us but also *commending* something in us? That is, perhaps Jesus simply knows that we have more to give, that we can be and do more than we have settled for, and that we can absolutely make a difference in the world if we simply believe in ourselves. And so I hear in these commands also the invitation to be those people God has created us to be so that we might not just persevere through this challenging life but actually to flourish, making a difference to those around us by sharing the abundant life Jesus has given us. Crazy? Maybe. But Jesus is not only dead serious about what he promises but actually will die -- and rise again! -- to show us that it's true. The sense of the word perfect here is about becoming what was intended, accomplishing one's God-given purpose in the same way that God constantly reflects God's own nature and purpose. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* gets closer to the mark, I think, when he translates it, “You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity.”

And here is the root of the issue. We can only do these other things -- repaying evil with good, forgiving and praying for those who harm us -- to the degree that we can live into our God-given identity as blessed and beloved children. You can't give what you don't have, and so only those

who have experienced love can in turn share it with others. *This might seem impossible for some of us right now. To forgive and love and trust that each person is a child of God.*

Which is why it matters who's saying these things in the first place. It's Jesus -- Jesus, the one who not only talked the talk of love but walked the walk, treading steadfastly to Jerusalem, enduring the shame and humiliation of the cross, embracing death itself...all so that we might know, experience, and trust just how much God loves us and thereby -- and only thereby! -- have abundant life. This Jesus not only commands, he also understands, understands just how hard it is for us to love rather than hate, to forgive rather than begrudge, to embrace rather than protect, to share rather than hoard, to heal rather than wound, especially when we ourselves walk so much of our lives wounded and hurt. *Jesus knows how hard it is. He lived in this world. He was judged while he loved, he was killed for that call for love and justice. And yet he loved and forgave anyway, right to his dying breath.s*

So what if we lived into our God-given identity as blessed and beloved children of God who, really knowing and believing and feeling we are loved, might then be able to love others as children of the kingdom? Will it be easy? Of course not. So many things get in the way. Past disappointments or hurts that still haunt us. Old grudges and wounds that are a long time healing. Painful memories that are slow to fade. But how will we see the light of love shining through all the darkness? How will we come to know our identity in Christ?

What is it that keeps you from living into who God has created you to be? Knowing and believing you are God's beloved child what holds you back from sharing God's love with others? Is there a hurt, fear, memory, resentment that keeps you from embracing the person God wishes you to be? Is there a label you place on yourself or others that keeps you from love? Perhaps you have a confession to make, what is blocking the light and love in you? I want to invite you to bring these to the light of Christ, to call for God's light to shine within them that we all may come to places of healing and light. That we all may learn how to love more deeply, embracing the wholeness we are created to be.

Lighting of the candles

"You are kingdom people, blessed and beloved by God and called to be salt and light in the world. Go, be who you are!" Amen.¹

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3076> The majority of today's sermon is taken from and quoting David Lose "The revolution starts here."