

SERMON TEXT FOR EPIPHANY 7A

PREACHED FEBRUARY 19, 2017

TEXT: Matthew 5:38-48, Leviticus 19.1-2,9-18; Psalm 119.33-40; 1 Corinthians 3.10-11,16-23

So my friends, what kind of community do we want to inhabit? One where "an eye for an eye" just makes everyone blind, or one in which people actually care for one another? This is the way I concluded last week's sermon on the text which appears directly before today's gospel lesson, our last in a series from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

In **today's** section, Jesus concludes his teachings on what it means to **fulfill the law**. In each case, Jesus shows us how to move beyond rote **observance** to embracing the **spirit** of the law; in other words, how to be true children of God who reflect God's **love** and God's **will** in our everyday actions and relationships.

The **problem/challenge** with this section of the Sermon on the Mount is that it is **easily dismissed** as that which could only apply to **Jesus'** time and not **ours**, that Jesus' world was **simpler** than ours and did not have the **complexities** of our own global realities. That is, until we realize that at the heart of Jesus' message in Matthew is a message essential for what it means to be church today. Loving your enemy? Really, Jesus? Do you **mean** that, or is that some sort of **euphemistic exclamation** meant to remind us to be **nice** to people?

No, love your enemies means **just that**. And it is an important message whether it is the **first** century or the **21st**. Jesus reminds us that our enemies are not always those we deem our **opposites**, our **detractors**, our **challengers**, or **resisters**. Our enemies are all too often those whom we do, indeed, **love**.

And then we stumble upon Jesus' **concluding** phrase: *"Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."* A quick check on this word in Greek shows that it can be translated as "perfect." But perhaps the meanings that **better capture** its essence are **"completion, intended goal, determined end."** It is an **arrow** shot by an archer to reach its target, or a peach tree's goal to yield peaches. So we might translate this passage more loosely to mean, "Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One whom God is supposed to be." In other words, Jesus is not asking us to be **perfect**, but to **persist in the goal** that God has for us.

Read **this** way, Jesus' words are less **command** than **promise**. God sees **more** in us than we **ourselves** do. God has **plans** and a **purpose** for us. God intends to **use** us to achieve something **spectacular**. And that something

spectacular is precisely to **be who we were created to be** and, in so doing, to help **create a different kind of world**.

Jesus calls this new world **the kingdom of God** – where **violence** doesn't always breed **more violence** and **hate** doesn't always kindle **more hate**. Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the logic of Jesus' kingdom well when he stated, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only **light** can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only **love** can do that."

So, can we do this – turn the other cheek, love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us? No, not **perfectly**. On some days, maybe **not at all**. But that's not really the point. It's not **our** job to bring in the kingdom; **Jesus** does that. It's our job to **live like we really believe that Jesus actually is bringing in God's kingdom**, and to realize that, in the meantime, we get to **practice living like Jesus' disciples** and citizens of this new kingdom.

This approach doesn't **forget** or even **minimize** the presence of **sin** in us or in the world. But neither does it assume that **God is limited by our sin**. Rather, it takes seriously that we are always being called by Jesus to **be more than we thought we could be**, and that we are invited to **claim our identity as God's chosen and beloved people** as we live in the world.

Jesus' **message** here – returning hate with love, turning the other cheek, praying for those who stand against us – is incredibly **counter-cultural**. I mean, this will not win us any kind of popularity contest. But it may help change the world for the better - **change**, not **save**. Again, that's **Jesus'** job. And because Jesus has **promised** to do that, we're free to take care of the corner **we** live in, practicing to live like Jesus' disciples throughout the week and then returning to church each Sunday to be **reminded** of Jesus' grace and forgiveness and to be **sent** out once more to live as part of Jesus' kingdom.

Being a disciple, then, does not require **perfection** but a **persistence** toward bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to bear. Can you think of examples of people throughout history who were **persistent** to the point of being **annoying**? I can think of a few from the scriptures: the widow and the judge; the woman looking for her lost coins; Mary confronting Jesus at the tomb of her brother Lazarus; the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair. Jesus suggests that an essential characteristic of what it means to be a disciple is to **persist in working toward the goal that Matthew's Beatitudes have in mind**. Anything **less**, it seems, could very well jeopardize the presence of the kingdom of God in the world.

So Jesus asks us to do something both **counterintuitive** and **counter-cultural**: love those unlikely to be loved. Love the poor, love your enemy, love the co-worker, love the conservative, love the liberal, love the Muslim, love the Buddhist, love the homosexual, love the transgendered person, love the person

least like you. This is the love of God. And if this love is extended to **us**, who are we to not extend it to **others** - even those who have sinned against us?

Bottom line: **We are not to dish out to offenders what they deserve.** We are not to deal with evil by plotting "*an eye for an eye*," but by living the vision of God's offer of love and redemption to all. Jesus **overcame evil with suffering love; he overcame evil with good.**

So the Sermon on the Mount isn't just about how to **behave**. It's about discovering the living God in the loving and dying Jesus, and learning to reflect that love **ourselves** into a world that needs it desperately. May we strive to be **perfect** - persistent and goal-oriented - as our Heavenly Father and his Son Jesus were perfect. AMEN