

***Love God and Love Your Enemy***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 5:38-48**  
**Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 23, 2020**

**Introduction**

We are getting to the heart of the Gospel today. The Jesus Seminar ranks the sayings of Jesus according to the likelihood that they originated with the historical Jesus. Turn the other cheek and love your enemies are two of the top three. They are bright red in their color scheme. The third original saying is the three Beatitudes that are common to Matthew and Luke: blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry and blessed are those who weep. No wonder the Sermon on the Mount is the canon within the canon for so many Christians.

I have preached this text several times. It is my favorite text. I will do something different today. My view is evolving. Before I have focused on how Gandhi and Martin Luther King and Walter Wink interpreted this text. Today I will focus on what I believe the historical Jesus and, Matthew, his editor, meant in this text. That is, what this text mean to its original audience.

**First Move: Turn the Other Cheek**

The Sermon on the Mount is a midrash on the great commandment: love God and love your neighbor. Midrash is the Jewish practice of expounding upon and interpreting the Law. Chapter 5, which we are finishing today, gives us examples of what it means to love your neighbor. Chapter 6 talks about what it means to love God. Lent and Easter will interrupt us. Lent begins next week. We will come back to Chapter 6 this summer.

Mary began the Antitheses last week. They all have the same formula: “You have heard that it was said, but I say to you.” Jesus states a proposition of law from the Old Testament. Then he states a new proposition that intensifies the demands of the law. It is a radicalization of the law. “You have heard that it was said, You shall not kill. But I say to you, do not even be angry with your brother.”

Each of the Antitheses focuses on what life in the kingdom of God is like. They are not a new set of laws. They describe a higher righteousness. To be righteous means to be in right relationship with. The Antitheses describe how people can be in right relationship with their neighbor.

The fifth Antithesis is about aggression and retaliation. You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Matthew is quoting from Deuteronomy 19:16-21. The law calls for proportionate punishment. You reap what you sow.

Jesus intensifies the Law. “But I say to you in addition, ‘Resist not evil.’” That is how it is translated in King James. It has raised lots of questions. Are we supposed to submit to evil? Jesus doesn’t do that. Jesus speaks out courageously against injustice wherever he sees it. King James may have had his own agenda. He wanted to encourage his subjects to submit to authority, not to resist it. A better translation would be, “Do not stand against the evil one.” It is a courtroom setting. Do not defend yourself against your accuser in court.

We look to the Passion Story to see how Jesus lives out this higher righteousness. When Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane, he makes no attempt to defend himself to the questions at his trial before Caiaphas, the high priest, and Pilate, the governor of Judea.

“Whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other.” For a right-handed person to strike someone facing him on the right cheek means the blow has to be with the back of the hand. Slapping someone with the back of the hand is an insult, usually by someone who is a social superior to the defendant. A master slaps a slave, a parent slaps a child, a soldier slaps a citizen. The insult causes more harm than the physical pain.

Jesus may have been thinking of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 50:6. “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.”

Jesus again models this higher righteousness in the Passion Story. At the end of his trial before Caiaphas, the high priests and the members of the Sanhedrin spit in Jesus’ face and struck him and slapped him.

Jesus gives another example from the courtroom. If someone wishes to quarrel with you and take your tunic or undershirt, give up your outer cloak to him as well. He is describing a creditor who has hauled a debtor into court, and the creditor takes everything he has, even his undershirt. Creditors were not allowed to take the outer cloak. That was like a blanket that people slept in. The debtor is giving more than he is required in order to end the fight. It would leave him naked in front of the court. Walter Wink suggests that the intent is to shame the creditor, who would appear greedy. More likely it was intended to shock the audience. It is not to be taken literally—it is intentionally hyperbolic, like cutting off your hand or gauging out your eye.

If a soldier requisitions you to carry his pack one mile, go a second mile. Do more than the law requires. This could be a criticism of the Zealots, a Jewish political party that resisted the Romans violently.

There is a lot of debate about who Jesus is referring to as the enemy. It could be the ones referred to in the eighth and ninth Beatitudes, those who are persecuting the disciples for following Jesus. Jesus commands the disciples to pray on behalf of those who are persecuting them.

If we think of loving your enemy as a political statement and see the enemy as the Romans, the poor, the meek, the merciful and peacemakers will be slaughtered if they violently resist the Romans. Jesus may be advocating that they wait on God to redeem them and liberate them from the Romans. If the focus is on the enemy at the personal level, Jesus could be telling his disciples to respond nonviolently by rooting pride, anger and vengeance out of their hearts.

## **Second Move: Love Your Enemies**

The last Antithesis is the climax. “You have heard that it was said, “You will love your neighbor and you will hate your enemy.” The command to love your neighbor comes from today’s Old Testament reading from Leviticus. Neighbor would have been understood to mean your fellow Israelite. There is no command in the Old Testament to hate your enemies, though many of the Psalms ask God to deliver the people from their enemies.

Jesus is deepening the command to love your neighbor. Loving the people in your own tribe and hating those outside the group is human nature: we see it in every time and culture. Suspicion of the stranger and the instinct for self-defense is hard-wired into us. It allowed us to survive as a species, but now it is holding us back. Our instinct for violence is original sin that we are born with.

Loving your enemies is not a strategy. We don’t do it because it gives us a better chance of winning, though non-violence is usually more successful than violence. We don’t do it to shame our enemies or transform them, though that sometimes happens.

Gandhi and King believed that loving your enemy was a way to transform your enemy. White Americans were horrified during the civil rights movement and were transformed when they saw police attacking non-violent marchers. For Gandhi and King, non-violence was a strategy for responding to a more powerful oppressor.

We don’t need to have warm, fuzzy feeling about them. Loving the enemy means that we pray for their well-being. Praying for the enemy forces us to see them

from God's point of view. We are forced to reckon with our common humanity. They, too, have been created in the image of God.

We love our enemies because that is what God is like. God causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good. God causes the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. God's love is indiscriminate and radically gracious.

This is a big, inclusive vision of God. God is God of all the people, not the exclusive God of our tribe. The gospels makes the same point when Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Matthew again makes the same point with the parable of the wheat and the tares [weeds], where the master allows the wheat and the tares to grow together. God loves everybody, even outcasts. We should love everybody because God loves everybody.

Jesus gives a couple of examples of the higher righteousness that is based on this big vision of God. It is human nature to love only the ones who love you. Even gang members and terrorist organizations do that. If you greet only your brothers, what incomparable thing are you doing? Jesus uses tax collectors and Gentiles as a foil. Do they not do the same? They were traditionally considered to be the enemies of God because they were unbelievers.

Jesus tells the disciples that by loving their enemies, they becomes sons of God. In Jewish thought, to be a son of someone is to have the same type of character. To be a son or daughter of God is to reflect God's love for each and every person. To be a son or daughter of God turns our attention back to the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." In Jewish thought, true peace comes only from God. Conflict between people was seen as inevitable. To love one's enemies is to share in God's peacemaking.

Jesus sums up the Antitheses with what sounds like an impossible challenge: "You will be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect." It helps if we recognize that this statement is in the future tense, not in the imperative mood. If you love in this way, you *will* be perfect as God is perfect. The Greek word τέλειός is translated as perfect, but it also means mature, complete, whole.

If you are filled with love, real love, ἀγάπη love, the kind of love that God has, that love will spill out of you out onto your enemy, even when your enemy is aggressive with you. Love of enemy is the fulfillment of love. You will see your enemy as wounded or frightened in some way—that is the source of his or her aggression. You will reach out instead of striking back. You will be trying to reconcile with your enemy instead of driving them further away. The spiritual consequence is that you will be perfect as God is perfect. You will be acting as your

true self instead of as the false self that society expects us to be, that responds in retaliation to protect our honor.

### **Third Move: The Lure of the Kingdom**

Jesus is describing what the dawning of the kingdom of God looks like. The renunciation of force brings into sharp contrast the difference between the kingdom of God and the unredeemed world.

All six Antitheses or contrasts illustrate what the fulfillment of the law looks like. The strongest force in the world is love. Love is not a weapon or a tool. Love has no ulterior motive. Love is for the benefit of its object, regardless of how they respond.

God's response to Jesus' nonviolent action was the resurrection. Jesus did not need to take any action to defend himself because God vindicated him. The witnesses to the resurrection believed that it was the first fruits of the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom would be inaugurated in all its fullness. That didn't happen. The kingdom of God did not come about in the way and in the time frame that Jesus and his early followers expected.

What about us? Should we defend ourselves in court? Should we turn the other cheek? Can we afford to imitate Jesus during his Passion? Won't we just wind up dead?

It helps if we look at the Antitheses as a set of ideals instead of a set of laws. The kingdom of God is a set of ideals. It is the harmony of harmonies. Everyone lives in peace with one another. The lion lies down with the lamb. The ideals are always pulling at us, leading us in the direction of the kingdom of God.

The ideals that lie behind the Antitheses are love and reconciliation. The Antitheses describe how people treat each other in the kingdom of God. They are a challenge for us because we live in between the times. The kingdom is partly realized in the ministry of Jesus, but it is still in the future before it will be realized in all its fullness. Meanwhile, we are living here in the real world, where human nature and conventional wisdom guide the values of our culture, where people hate their enemies.

The ideals show us God's vision for what life on earth could be like. God is inviting us to share in that vision. To orient our lives to the ideals of the kingdom instead of to the values of conventional wisdom.

Ideals can become demonic when they become dogmatic, when they become a new set of rules. If you lust, cut out your eye. If you divorce, you can never remarry without committing adultery. Give money to everyone who asks from you. These are

creative responses that are supposed to trigger our imaginations. To encourage us to think of new ways to respond non-violently to provocation.

When people approach us with hostility, we should still see them as a child of God. We still try to love them as God loves them. That is the hard thing that Jesus is asking us to do. God is always calling us to deepen the relationship that each one of us has with God and with our neighbor. God is always pulling us toward reconciliation.

This takes courage. Martin Luther King believed that it took more courage to respond with non-violence. The natural thing to do is to respond to violence with violence, but that only results in a vicious cycle of violence that never ends. You never have peace. Whoever loses the fight is bitter and resentful. Dr. King said,

Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil.

The Sermon on the Mount was central to Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent movement. Gandhi thought it was essential for his followers to have courage. He said that a commitment to non-violence requires the same courage and willingness to suffer as a soldier in battle. Gandhi believed that he could do nothing with a coward, but that he could make a violent person into a non-violent one. He said, "Where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence." But that is a false choice. Non-violence is a better way.

## **Conclusion**

Pursuing a higher righteousness will change us. As nonviolence becomes a way of life for us, we will let go of anger and bitterness and be filled with love and the desire to make peace.

Our role is to be salt and light. We model what a nonviolent community looks like. Our goal is not to transform others, but to reflect God's love of the world.

We can leave the results in God's hands. Our task is to witness to the good news of the kingdom.

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