

Sunday February 19th, 2017
7th Sunday after Epiphany

PRAYER: O Lord, your word is very hard to hear sometimes, but we know such hard words are life itself. As we meet your word today, let your still small voice speak to us in the quiet of our hearts. Let your whispers be to our souls as your thunder cracks are to the mountaintops. Let your difficult words be to our spirits as your rains are to the dry ground. Deliver us from the hardness of heart, that we might find the hard way that leads to life. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: We pour out our hearts before you, O God; you are our refuge and strength. Waves of doubt beat against us, weakening our faith. Tremors of discord shake our foundation. The winds of temptation drive us from course. Too often we rely on ourselves when wisdom is sought. Still the storms in our souls! Provide in Christ a haven of hope for our troubled and distracted spirits. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Scripture declares that Christ is “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.” He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him. He lives to make intercession for all. In Christ, our high priest; abides the assurance of the forgiveness we seek.

STEWARDSHIP: Through the grace of Christ the foundations of faith have been laid. Christ is the cornerstone, which has been set in place, and we are called to be the building in which the Spirit of God dwells. Each of us is called to be a builder, as well, and the quality of our work will be revealed when Christ shall return. We present our gifts as part of effort to build on the sure foundation of Christ. May, these tithes and offerings prove to be part of God’s design and enduring in nature.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, our teacher of all generations, we praise your holy name. You have dealt with us mercifully, refusing to enlighten us beyond our capacity to understand or to judge us beyond our understanding. When we were children, you allowed us to speak and understand and judge as children. But now that the light of the world has come, you spurn our attempt to return to our childish ways. Now that you have shown us what it means to be fully and truly human, you confront us with adult obligations and you judge us by adult standards. We thank you, dear God, for not letting us run away from ourselves.

In Jesus you revealed to us the humanity you had in mind at creation. We marvel at the sight of such goodness: that does not strike back when struck; that goes two miles when asked to go only one; that does not refuse the beggar or withhold a loan from the borrower; that returns the hate of the enemy with love; that offers up prayers for the persecutors; that greets foreigners as well as neighbours; and that greets the injustice of the unjust with justice of the just.

We know intimately all the excuses for not judging ourselves by this standard. We say things like: we cannot interpret the bible literally or we must not confuse the twentieth century with the first. Yes, we know these excuses, and sometimes they are both relevant and valid. But often they are neither. Grant us honesty, dear Lord, to acknowledge the darkness within that hides your light from above.

As we seek to recover the relevance of the teaching and example of Jesus, it is not alone for ourselves that we pray.

We pray also for this strife torn world, divided by self-seeking religion and unchecked nationalism. Hatred and vengeance stalk the earth: they abuse young children too young to know they are being abused; they terrorize ones too innocent to know the folly of returning evil for

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evil; and they provide excuses for the peddlers of violence. Forbid that we should continue to aggravate the problem; grant us the grace to become part of the solution. If we cannot take Jesus literally, at least let us not fail to take him seriously.

Distant from you, dear God, our vision grows dim, our hearing grows dull and our heart grows weak. Bridge the gap between us that we might, once again, see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and understand with our hearts. Let us leave this service, renewed and determined, ready both to obey and reveal your holy and righteous will.

BENEDICTION: Go now and be holy in the name of the Holy One. When you reap the harvest of your land, leave a portion of your bounty for the poor. When you speak the thoughts of your mind, let the truth of your words shame the false. When you deal with a brother or sister, let the rightness of your works humble the crooked. Go now, and love your neighbour as yourself, in the name of the One who loves the world.

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Matthew 5:38-48
“Anything but This!”

It was a lovely spring day as the owner of a soap manufacturing plant and his pastor were walking together down the street in their home town. The soap manufacturer casually said, “The gospel you preach hasn’t done much good, has it? Just observe. There is still a lot of wickedness in the world and a lot of wicked people too!”

The pastor made no reply until they passed a dirty little child making mud pies in a puddle. Seizing the opportunity, the pastor said, “I see that soap hasn’t done much good in the world, for there is much dirt and many dirty people around.” The soap manufacturer replied, “Oh, well, soap is only useful when it is applied.” And the pastor said, “Exactly-so it is with the gospel.”

Wow! No truer words have ever been spoken. We can sit here week after week, listening to sermons, and bible readings, and learn a great deal about the bible and faith; but unless we apply it to our lives, we are simply wasting our time. Application of Christ’s teaching is the key to the Christian life. A Christian life with no application of scripture is like an iPhone or iPad with no apps. It’s nice to look at, but it’s useless.

Knowing the importance of applying the gospel to my own life is the reason I approach today’s text, with fear and trembling. Living out the gospel, as Christ taught and demonstrated, is challenging enough, even with God’s help; but then I run into these very hard words of Jesus in today’s lesson. Why did Jesus say these things? All I seem to gather from these few striking verses is, how far from perfect I truly am.

We want to ask, “Why Jesus, did you go to such an extreme as to tell us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?” To begin to find an answer I draw on Daniel Patte, who in his commentary on Matthew, points out that in the previous section, which we examined last week; Jesus had been talking about the importance of relationships and the importance of reconciliation. Relationships are, according to Jesus, our highest calling. They deserve our full attention.

Now, having heard Jesus talk about the high value he places on relationships, there now arises a strong temptation; the temptation to say, “Yes! But!” We hear you Jesus, and we understand what you are saying. We may even appreciate the importance of what you are saying. **YES**, we know how important relationships are, **BUT** what about my enemy? What about the person who seems to take great delight in making my life miserable?

Most of us have someone like that in our lives. “A thorn in the flesh” as Paul says.

This is, especially, a significant question for anyone in a position of leadership or authority. It is, a curious fact that, the moment you are in authority over someone else, it seems you have enemies. Be it a manager, a director, a teacher, a minister, a politician, or whatever: the moment you take on the mantle of leadership is the moment you put on a bull’s-eye. You become someone’s target.

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Perhaps the enemy is someone who is jealous of your success. Perhaps they feel you are not educated enough, or experienced enough to have your success. Whatever the reason for their animosity, it raises a powerful question about Jesus' call to preserve relationships. What about the person who persecutes me for my faith, undermines my authority, or attacks my integrity? Surely, this is an exception to the rule about relationships. We are sure that even Jesus would understand if we exclude our enemies.

How, so very human a response this is. In every debate I have ever had about any issue, someone, even myself quite often, will raise an objection. We will want to find a loophole. This particular issue of avoiding a relationship with our enemies has the added dynamic of being supported by scripture, namely the Old Testament. "You have heard the Law of Moses say, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'" (Lev. 19:18)

I hear us saying, "You see, Jesus, even the bible allows us to hate our enemies". Moses said so. It should also be remembered that back in verse 17 of Matthew 5, Jesus said he came not to abolish the Law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. It would appear then, that if we can defend our opinion or actions based on biblical direction, we can hate our enemies. After all, the law is the law. If the bible says it, it must be followed. It must be applied, as I already argued.

And, as we know, if we read any history, the bible has been used to justify all kinds of things. Verses have been selected, interpreted, and then used to excuse all manner of terrible action. The crusades, the inquisition, splitting of churches, and even the killing of abortion providers: are all done in "the name of God". My friend Rev. Blake Eady humorously drives the absurdity of this approach home, when he takes two unrelated verses and ties them together to justify harming someone.

He quotes, "The bible tells us 'Vengeance is mine', saith the Lord." And it also says, "Be ye imitators of God." Many sincere people, using biblical precedence, will argue they are standing against evil. They believe they have to be proactive, that they are even called by God, in fighting this scourge of evil. Into this thinking, which seems logical and even lawful, Jesus stands and says, "Hold on a minute."

"Yes, I did say that I did not come to abolish the Law of Moses", but I also said, "I came to fulfill it." "You've heard it said" is now tempered by Jesus' words, "But I say". The change brought by Jesus, means first and foremost, that relationships take precedence over any rights I may have. Even if the Old Testament states that I do have these rights. Scripture is not a weapon for revenge, nor is it a license to judge others.

Not even the Law of Moses, as important as it is, can be used to avoid loving your enemy, and reconciling with those who seek to harm us. Scripture exists as a valuable tool to correct ourselves. However, and this is critical; the application of biblical principles is to be used on ourselves, not for us to use against others. Disciples of Jesus are to maintain relationship, even when the terms of said relationship are set by evil people who mistreat us.

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I did say, at the beginning, that these verses are really hard to hear, and even harder to apply. How can I honestly justify giving no resistance to an evil person? I am sure; you felt as I did, that such a command seems to make me out to be a doormat.

What I mean by this is that it would appear that Jesus is allowing nasty people to walk all over me. However, Jesus is not asking us to be doormats. This is not about being weak and inactive; on the contrary. Jesus goes on to tell us that in the face of difficult relationships we are to be proactive, but not with vengeance. In these relationships with an enemy, we are to be actively participating in more positive ways.

Examine if you will, Jesus' prescription in being proactive with our enemies. If someone hits you on the cheek, take an action and turn the other cheek. If someone sues you for your shirt, take an action and give them your cloak as well. If you are ordered to go one mile, take an action and go two. If you are asked for money, take action and give it.

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? We are not to be doormats. Instead, we are being active in changing the dynamics of a toxic relationship. We may very well have the right to stop these terrible things from happening to us. Both the Law of Moses and even our civil law, makes that clear.

Deuteronomy 24:10 tells us that we are entitled to keep our cloak, especially if we are poor. However, Jesus is saying, "I want my followers to go one better. I want them to go above and beyond the law." Why, because in matters of law, no matter how right someone is, when the law is applied, the damaged is done to the relationship. If I get sued in a court, it would be very difficult for me to relate to the one who sued me.

In all probability the relationship is permanently damaged and as I stated before, relationships are the most important thing in our lives to preserve. Hearing all this, I've got to wonder, how am I supposed to do this? I mean, to love my enemies, and submit to them, is so counter intuitive. I am tempted to just give up trying to be like Jesus. I know we are supposed to be different than the world, but come on!

Why Jesus? Why such an impossibly high standard? Well, such love makes us true children of God. It makes us perfect as God is perfect. Loving our enemies and submitting to them, clearly identifies us with the heart of God. This is the true cost of following Jesus, and these are not just words from Jesus. He lived them. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-11.

Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As you can see, Jesus' teaching is all designed to get us to follow his example.

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Part of the example is recognizing that God shows no partiality to people. “For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust too.” (vs.45) As Christ’s disciples we also are not to show partiality to people, even to people we have been mistreated by.

“If we love only those who love us, what good is that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that.” (Vs. 46-47) We are to be different; actually we are to be radically different. If we are not different from the rest of the world, our righteousness is but “filthy rags”. It is worthless.

Until faith makes a difference in our hearts, it will make no difference in our lives. Christ’s calling to be in relationship with each other, no matter what, demands more than just doing Christian things. Christ’s calling demands that we become Christians; true Christians. We become people who have the same attitude as Christ Jesus. The obstacle to applying these hard words of Jesus lies not with the understanding.

I know we understand the depths of what Jesus is calling us to. The real issue is not how hard these words are, but rather is it even possible to apply them.

Is it even possible to overcome the toxicity of a bad relationship? Is it possible to end the sleepless nights, the distractions and the mess caused by myself or by someone else? I wish I could say categorically, “Yes, it is possible”. I would love to say, “Yes, it is possible to find some peace, after you have turned the other cheek, gave away your cloak or gone the extra mile.” I know, in my heart, that if Jesus called us to this level of relationship, it must be possible.

Yet, I know all too well that, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”. That being said, however, there are two keys to making this calling of Christ work. The first is prayer. Jesus told us to “Pray for those who persecute us”. This is critical, because it introduces God into the relationship we have with an enemy. Prayer recognizes that only God can change a heart, both our own and our enemy’s.

Prayer is the place to start, but the real strength to deal in a healthy way with our enemies is with love; which is why Jesus stressed love. Many years ago my professor, Dr. Ken Jackson, pointed out that this call to turn the other cheek happens all the time. Namely, he meant parents do it on a regular basis. Your child in a fit of anger and frustration shouts at you that they “hate” you. That’s a stinging slap in the face.

Do you lash out? Some parents might, but most do not. Why do we not retaliate? It is love isn’t it. We see it all the time, in all kinds of relationships. You can take an awful lot of abuse from someone, if you love them. I am certainly not condoning people remaining in dangerous or abusive situations, but when we are slapped by angry insults, or taken advantage of by our loved ones, it often rolls right off us. We may shed some tears, but we keep on trying to relate and love the one who hurt us.

I remember hearing a story some time back about two men who were talking in a coffee shop. The one man was telling his friend what a terrible time he was having with his son.

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The young man was verbally abusive, experimented with drugs, got into trouble with the law, and skipped school most of the time. He was disrespectful to both his parents, and quite often they didn't know where he was.

The other man listened and then said brashly, "Well, if he were my son, I'd throw him out." To which the father replied, "Well, if he was your son, I'd throw him out too, but he is my son and I love him." When you love someone, you can tolerate a great deal. You can in love remain with your spouse in "sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer". Out of love, you can be civil and even kind, to the person who seeks to harm you.

I didn't say it was easy. Loving your enemies is hard, after all it cost Jesus his life. But if we want to be perfect, like our Father in heaven is perfect, then we must love; and love especially, those that are the hardest for us to love. Our attitude and hearts should be such, that as Christ's followers we should be the easiest persons in the world to love. There should be no obstacles to others loving us and no obstacles for us loving others.

So consider this the next time someone: slaps you on the cheek, takes your shirt, and demands you walk a mile; or you may feel you have every right to defend yourself and protect what is yours. Consider also, the next time you might be tempted to point to the Law of Moses, and state that it says "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". We should remember, at such times as these, that Jesus says, "**YES**, it is lawful, **BUT** I call you to a better way."

And that better way is perfection, just as Jesus is perfect.