

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
February 13, 2022
Matthew 5:38–48

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your word, that hearing, we may believe, and in believing, we may trust our lives, this day and all the days that lie ahead to your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Like last week, Jesus sets the bar high for what it looks like to follow God. He even ends this portion of his sermon telling the people to be as perfect as God, that really is a high bar! If last week’s charge was to be

more righteous than even the religious experts, this week it is to be perfect, perhaps. That seems impossible, and it is. The apostle Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans that we all “fall short of the glory of God.” And yet we have Jesus telling us to be perfect.

Many scholars agree that when we hear the word here translated as perfect, that we aren't hearing what Jesus probably meant. Perfect doesn't mean perfection, the word is closer to the word “complete.” Scholars suggest it is more about obedience than perfection. Jesus wants us to be complete in our obedience. And this makes sense to me when you look at the context of what Jesus is preaching when he tells us to be complete. The sentences that come before are talking about loving our enemies, not just our friends. Love without bias. Love without playing favorites. Love the ones you think are unlovable. Jesus is elevating the requirement of what love looks like. Yet again in his sermon, Jesus is calling us to a demanding discipleship, a higher level of obedience. Jesus is asking more.

Before calling people to a higher standard of following God, I noted last week, that Jesus declared that his intention was not to overturn the law or the ways of the prophets. We have skipped ahead several verses in his sermon for today's reading. Just after the reading from last week, and including what we heard for today, Jesus spends a good portion of the time in between in his sermon with sayings that begin with, “You have heard it said...” and then having him continue with the words, “but I say to you.” He says these phrases six different times. Each time, he is not getting rid of a law, but he is expanding the meaning of the law and what it means to follow the law.

Our reading today began with, “You have heard it said, ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.’” While

an “eye for an eye” sounds harsh to our ears, in Jewish law it was used as a means to ensure there was a proportional response to any offense, and not an escalation of violence and retribution. In a court case before the authorities, the idea of an “eye for an eye” was meant to give the judge an ethical guideline and to prevent further vengeance. It wasn’t likely that someone’s literal eye would be given in exchange, rather, a payment that was equivalent to losing an eye would be assessed as the penalty. This type of proportional response prevented a heightening of vengeance. It was to ensure justice in the community. Jesus, however, goes further. He does not suggest a proportional response, rather he seems to imply that we shall allow for further injury by turning the other cheek to the person who hit us!

Jesus goes on to give the example that if someone sues us for our coat, we should give them the cloak as well. That is followed by his instruction that if we are forced to walk a mile, that we should walk a second also. All these examples, somehow, just don’t seem correct. If I have been slapped, why would I want to get slapped again, and offer my other cheek? Why, if forced to walk a mile, would I want to consider a second? If I no longer have my coat because it has been taken from me, do I really want to give up my cloak as well? All of this makes it seem as if Jesus is saying we should allow ourselves to be battered and taken advantage of. That doesn’t seem like it is being extra righteous, it seems like it’s foolish and setting ourselves up for more harm.

Theologian and scholar, Walter Wink, has been amazingly helpful for many, me included, in helping understand what Jesus is suggesting in these verses. In the mid 1980’s into the early 2000’s Wink wrote extensively about power, domination, and violence. He wrote a trilogy of books about power entitled, *Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers*, and *Engaging the Powers*. A later book was entitled, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*.

In these books Wink wrestled with the notion of systemic and institutional power, violence and evil, and how Christians can oppose such things in a nonviolent but strong way. Wink believed that violence was not just occasional or unpredictable but rather violence was the result of a belief system. Wink was concerned that the greatest faith in the world was not one of the many religions, but a pervasive faith in violence. He believed non-violent resistance to this evil was of critical importance for people of faith, and what was needed to transform communities. It was in this lens that he interpreted Jesus' words in Matthew 5.

Wink believed that the original Greek word that had been translated as "resist," in the phrase "do not resist an evildoer," was actually a military term that meant to "resist violently or lethally." According to Wink, Jesus is not encouraging us to be passive, rather he is encouraging us to resist, just not with deadly force or retaliatory violence. Do not violently resist an evildoer is what Wink believes Jesus is saying. Resist, but do not do so violently.

This idea is even more in focus when he describes what Jesus is saying when he tells us to turn the other cheek. Jesus says that if we are struck on the right cheek, we should turn so that the left cheek is open to be hit as well. It is instructive and important that Jesus is specific about which cheek is hit first. In Jesus' time and culture, it would have been almost unheard of for someone to touch another's face with their left hand, even if it was for a slap. Not only were most people right-handed, as they are today, it was considered unclean to use your left hand in his time. We can assume that the person doing the slapping is doing so with their right hand. For someone to hit another person with their right hand on the other person's right cheek, it would have to be a back-handed slap. A violent demeaning gesture, at that time, that would have been used by a person who believed themselves to be superior to the person being

slapped. A master to a slave, or a Roman soldier toward a Jew for example. But hitting someone with your right hand on their left cheek was only done if the people fighting were considered equals.

Wink writes, “By turning the cheek, the servant makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand: ... The left cheek now offers a perfect target for a blow with the right fist; but only equals fought with fists, as we know from Jewish sources, and the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling’s equality. This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship ... By turning the cheek, then, the ‘inferior’ is saying, ‘I’m a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won’t take it anymore.’”ⁱ

This nonviolent resistance is shown in the example of the coat and the cloak as well. Jesus says if someone sues you for your coat, give them the cloak as well. The coat is an outer garment. As we can appreciate in this time of year, a coat is necessary to protect you from the cold. It would be a hardship to lose one’s coat for sure, and if a person is being sued for their coat, it is hard to imagine they owned much else, so to lose it in a lawsuit would be a substantial burden. But to give one’s cloak as well, that indeed is another level altogether because the cloak was a person’s undergarment. Imagine then being in a courtroom and having to hand over your coat to the person who sued you, and then also handing them your cloak so that you were standing there naked. This person who only had the coat on their back, who would have the nerve to sue that person for a threadbare coat, best to show the absurdity and injustice of such a thing by also handing over your cloak and standing there naked. In that act of defiance perhaps the plaintiff might see the other person’s humanity.

Jesus gives a third example of walking the extra mile. Again, Wink shows just how subversive this practice may be. Roman soldiers were permitted by their commanders to force Jewish people to carry their gear. A Jew might be walking along, perhaps on their way to work, or with their family, in any situation, and a Roman soldier could make the person put their own belongings down on the side of the road and carry the soldier's gear in whichever way the soldier was traveling. However, the soldier, as a somewhat humanitarian gesture, was only permitted to allow the other person to carry their gear for a mile. If they allowed a person to travel more than a mile, the soldier could be punished severely for breaking this rule. To walk the second mile then, would be an act of defiance.

These are not actions that allow people to walk all over us, rather, these actions are about resisting oppressive systems and structures. These acts are a peaceful subversion. They are an act of nonviolent resistance. They are actions to force those in power to see the other person's humanity and view them as equals. They are calls for respect and dignity. They are behaviors intended to stimulate a person's conscience. They are actions to subvert the status quo. It is a nonviolent strategy to shine the spotlight on demeaning and cruel behaviors. It is a strategy to change the world away from a way of violence into the way of love.

And that is where Jesus closes this portion of his sermon, by turning to love. As I mentioned before, he is calling his followers to a demanding love. Again, Jesus starts with the formula, "You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'" Love without bias. Love without restraint. Love the ones you think are unlovable. And as I have said before, this is not easy work that Jesus calls us to, but it is necessary work.

In a sermon delivered in 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Jesus was very serious when he gave this command; he wasn’t playing. He knows that it’s hard to love your enemies.... He realized that it was painfully hard, pressingly hard. But he wasn’t playing. And we cannot dismiss this passage as just another example of...hyperbole.... This is a basic philosophy of all that we hear coming from the lips of our Master.”ⁱⁱ

And notice that Jesus does not say we should like our enemies. To like something seems more sentimental, it is wrapped up in our feelings toward someone. But love is something bigger than that. The writer bell hooks wrote and talked a lot about love, and I think her words are instructive and helpful. She warns about thinking about love as a feeling. It is not a feeling, but rather an action. She writes, “To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility. We are often taught we have no control over our ‘feelings.’ Yet most of us accept that we choose our actions, that intention and will inform what we do. We also accept that our actions have consequences.... If we were constantly remembering that love is as love does, we would not use the word in a manner that devalues and degrades its meaning.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Love then is manifested in actions. Love is accountability. Love is making choices to act in nonviolent ways. Love is to be invested in seeing the humanity and the divine in others. Hooks writes, “We choose to love...When we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another’s spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist... There can be no love without justice.”

Love is a way of life. Love is a way of being in the world that makes demands on us. Love takes practice. Love is a choice we make. As hooks says, “Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust.”

Jesus makes the connection between love and enemies with acts of nonviolent resistance and defiance in the face of injustice and abusive systems. They are inextricably linked. Even our enemies, or those that do not like us, can be redeemed by love. In the Martin Luther King sermon, I mentioned earlier, Dr. King comments that the command to love your enemy are certainly words of “cosmic proportion,” but that he believes Jesus is also a practical realist and that the command to love our enemies, “is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization... it is love that will save our world.”

Jesus pushes us to see the other as the child of God that they are; to see the good in them, to see that the other is also made in the image of God. Love is necessary to change the world, because hate distorts all of us. Again, Dr. King says, “We usually think of what hate does for the individual hated or the individuals hated, or the groups hated. But it is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates.... For the person who hates, the beautiful becomes ugly and the ugly becomes beautiful. For the person who hates, the good becomes bad and the bad becomes good. For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That’s what hate does. You can’t see right. The symbol of objectivity is lost. Hate destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater.... So, Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated.”

God is love. But it is not a trite simple love. It is more demanding than that. It requires honest and difficult conversation; it requires nonviolent dissent and action in the face of violence and injustice. It requires

practice. It requires accountability. And it requires grace. May we be complete in God's love and in the way of Jesus. My hope and prayer is that we, to the best of our abilities do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Amen.

ⁱ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millenium*

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

ⁱⁱⁱ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*