

**The Sermon on the Mount: Love Your Enemies. Really?**  
**John 14:15-17, 25-27 and Matthew 5:38-48**  
**May 15, 2016 Pentecost Sunday**  
**M. Michelle Fincher**  
**Calvary Presbyterian Church**

Be perfect. Not be pretty good, or be prepared, or be all that you can be. Be perfect. Not almost perfect or be really something or even be practically perfect in every way, just like my childhood patron saint, Mary Poppins. No. Be perfect, says Jesus.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by this outrageous demand that summarizes the end of Matthew chapter 5. Remember how the chapter begins and how it unfolds: Jesus pronounces a series of patently ridiculous blessings, then seems to moderate with sayings about salt and light that end up making equally ridiculous claims. This is followed by an assertion that he has come to fulfill the law, rather than curtail it in any fashion, and then he tosses in a warning to any who presume to lessen the demands of the law, bringing that section to a rousing coda with an insistence that his hearers' righteousness exceed that of the most notable standards of the day. Next come the six antitheses, concluding with the call to resist evil and love one's enemies. Are we really surprised, then, that Jesus wraps things up by telling us to be perfect? The entire chapter is crazy—and I might as well tell you, it's not going to get any better in the chapters to follow.

Matthew 5 is impossible to follow in whole or in part. Love your enemies. Seriously? Nobody loves their enemies. That's what makes them enemies: we hate them! What is the difference between a friend and an enemy if you love them both? Surely Jesus is not serious here. Surely we are not to take him literally. If we do, then there will be a lot of red-faced, coatless, exhausted people living like doormats, letting anybody and everybody take advantage of them. You are kidding, right, Jesus? Maybe we're supposed to read the text like a parable, or a metaphor.

The whole thing is outrageous. We want to be Christians at potluck suppers. We love being Christians at infant baptisms and weddings. We really enjoy being Christians at Christmas. We even like being Christians at funerals. But, we didn't sign up for this extreme, radical stuff that Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. We don't want to be Christians when it is time to turn a cheek, give away a cloak, go the second mile, give to a worthless beggar or loan everything we have to anybody who wants it. Who can actually pull off loving their enemies,

anyway? Who really prays for the good and the blessing of those who persecute them? Who can be perfect? Let's just say it: nobody. Total depravity shows up in the news every day. It shows up in the church. I can attest to the fact that it is in pulpits every Sunday. We cannot do what Jesus is asking us to do, at least not on our own. Maybe I should just pick another text. Let's try a psalm next week!

As providence would have it, we come to this part of the Sermon on the Mount on Pentecost, the day the church celebrates the giving of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the disciples he would send the Spirit once he had returned to his Father. Jesus promised that the Spirit will never leave us, that the Spirit will be with us forever as an advocate who will remind us of all that Jesus has said and lead us into all truth.

One of those truths is that we are God's children. We are God's heirs, God's family, God's very own flesh and blood, God's legacy. Far too often we read the Sermon on the Mount and we think Jesus is giving us a morality improvement program, but that's not what he is after. Perfection is not the accumulation of good deeds, restrained actions, and pure desires, as important as those things are. Perfection is a state of being, a state of being that we are given by virtue of belonging to God's family. In the words of Professor of Homiletics William Brosend, "The 'command' to be perfect is not a call to devout and holy action; it is an invitation to self-recognition" that requires us to embrace the gift we were given at creation, the gift of being made in God's image.

As some of you know, one of my grandmothers is still living. She turned 98 in January. Age 97 was a really rough year for her, but she is much stronger now and it seems to me that she has a decent shot to reach 100. This is my mom's mom, and if you were to see my grandmother, my mother, and my daughter all lined up with me, you'd know immediately that we are related. In both physical characteristics and in many of our personality traits and mannerisms, it's obvious that we are four generations springing from one root. For better and for worse, the apple falls close to the tree in my family.

This is a picture of what Jesus is talking about. We are God's children, and there is a family resemblance that runs through the generations that we now bear and carry on. In particular, how we act with regard to retribution and our enemies is a distinguishing characteristic of our family tree. Responding in love in impossible situations is an indication of our self-recognition, a sign that we know who we are and to whom we belong. Love is what shows the world that we are part of the family of God.

It's always important to put scripture in context, and we need to remember that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is addressing a group of people who are living under Roman occupation in a culture permeated with violence. Jesus understands the very human desire for the Jews to retaliate against the violence done to them. He also understands the consequences of such retaliation, which will only provoke greater violence from their oppressors. The appropriateness of violent resistance to the Roman occupation was a matter of intense debate in the Jewish community of Jesus' day.

Jesus' clear and distinct teaching guides his followers away from retaliatory acts and into ways of peace. His directive on turning the other cheek is both an act of defiance and a means of bringing shame to the perpetrator. His advice to subject oneself to the injustice of giving up not only the outer garment but the inner clothing as well, and to become a beast of burden by carrying the load twice as far as required, were all expressions of active, nonviolent resistance.

Violence begets greater violence, but history has shown that a nonviolent response does not necessarily prevent further violence. Does that then absolve us from finding other ways of responding to the violence in our families, in our lives, and in our societies? It does not. These teachings of Jesus are meant to be taken seriously, and they challenge us to a new understanding of the kingdom of God on earth. They commission us to display our family resemblance and bear witness to our identity as God's sons and daughters by finding just and nonviolent means to peace in the midst of violence. As if that weren't hard enough, Jesus isn't finished.

I dare say most, if not all, of us have had the experience of being accosted on the street by someone asking for a handout. Sometimes the evidence of drug addiction, alcoholism, or mental or social illness is obvious; sometimes we're not sure. Truth be told, we would rather not see such people at all. We don't know what to do. Our consciences are pricked by the disparity between our prosperity and their need, yet we legitimately don't want to be enablers for peoples' illnesses. Then there's the fact that Jesus' call to give to those who beg and to lend to those who want to borrow goes against the world's value system. Especially here in the United States, we admire those who are self-made. People, we think, are supposed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, take care of themselves, work for everything they get. What are we supposed to do?

Jesus' teaching calls us to act justly and mercifully towards all people, and he then moves us progressively from nonviolent resistance to active love. The law said we are to love our neighbors which the Jews defined as those who shared their

ethnic and religious identity. Jesus takes the law in hand and makes a giant leap forward. He calls on us not just to love our neighbor but also for us to love our enemies. In the Jews case, that was the hated Roman occupiers, which needless to say required them to make a radical change in their thinking. It requires no less of us.

Those who hurt us, who betray us, who use and misuse us, who lie about us or seek their own advantage at our expense—surely these cannot possibly be people to whom we need, or are willing, to show love. Perhaps this is the key to Jesus' message. Those who perpetrate harm and discord are the very ones we need to love for our own sake as Christians. They also may need to receive the love that Christ has placed in our hearts, but I wonder if it isn't more important that we as followers of Jesus offer the love of God. We are called to active involvement in spreading the love of God to the lost and the least. Those who are lost in spirals of violence and poverty of body, mind or spirit need continuous exposure to the love of God that offers renewal and hope. God's love extends to all people, and we are to share the love that God has placed in our hearts with all people. Love has the ability to bring about change. God's love changes us. It is that love which transcends the need to retaliate when wrong has been done to us; it also compels us to have compassion for those who have wronged us.

But, we can't do it on our own. It really is impossible. It is only the life of Christ lived in and through us, activated and empowered by the Holy Spirit, that enables us to love our enemies. No one can produce a Christ-like life by sheer will power or discipline, any more than we produce the DNA that runs through our families. The Spirit has to do the work in us.

For me, it makes a difference to realize Jesus' relentless unwillingness for evil to win. Evil is only overcome with good, not with a stronger version of evil. Break the cycle...that's what Jesus is laying out for us. Break the cycle with your estranged sibling. Break the cycle with your spouse or child. Break the cycle with that co-worker or neighbor. It's not easy, of course. Extreme evil demands extreme good. It requires a good that is tenacious which requires more than just our nominal efforts. We have to go deeper, and we can only do it in the power of God's Spirit.

These are some of the most challenging, outrageous words in all of scripture. What are we to do with them? I think Dietrich Bonhoeffer sums it up well with these words from *The Cost of Discipleship*:

“Humanly speaking, it is possible to understand the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. But Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience—not interpreting or applying it, but doing and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his words. He does not mean for us to discuss it as an ideal. He really means for us to get on with it.”

Friends, let’s get on with it. Amen.