

The Reverend Shelley Ryan
St. Luke's Episcopal Church - Anchorage, Kentucky
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany: Year A ~ Feb. 18 & 19, 2017
Matthew 5:38-48

The past two Saturdays/Sundays you have heard Fr. Michael and me preaching excerpts of scripture from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. These teachings that are paramount to our faith are the longest continuous segment of Jesus' speaking found in the New Testament. The Sermon on the Mount has been one of the most widely quoted sections of the Canonical Gospels, which includes some of the best known teachings of Jesus (the Beatitudes, and the Lord's Prayer). In fact, for most Christians, the Sermon on the Mount contains the central precepts of Christian discipleship. Therefore, the preaching that Jesus proclaimed to the multitudes of people along the Sea of Galilee carries great significance then, and it still carries great significance for us today. We are reminded by the Epistle to the Hebrews "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8). He remains the same.

The original intent for the law "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", which was given to the Hebrew people, was intended to equalize for the sufferer appropriate and equal compensation. Jesus knows this law, but he also understands the challenges faced by His followers who are living in a civilization of violence under Roman occupation. Jesus understands their desire to retaliate for the wrong done to them, and also consequences of that retaliation that will provoke more violence from their oppressors.

Jesus' decree of "turning the other cheek" is both an act of disobedience and also a means of bringing about dishonor to the perpetrator of the original act of violence. Similarly, His advice to subject oneself to the injustice of giving up not only one's outer garment, but their inner garment as well, and to become a 'beast of burden' by going the extra mile, were each

expressions of functional , non-violent reactions. Jesus' distinct intention is to guide his followers away from retaliatory acts of violence and into ways of peace. More modern day examples of this way of peace and non-violence that Jesus proposed could be attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi.

We are all aware that violence begets more violence, and historically, and even in our modern day, we know that a non-violence response does not necessarily preclude further violence. Nonetheless, these teachings of Jesus are to be taken as seriously today, as they were while He walked the earth. These teachings challenge the church to a new understanding of the reign of God on the earth. The teachings commission each of us, and the church as a whole, to seek out just and non-violent avenues to peace in the midst of violence. These teachings call us to do justice as followers of Christ and to actively move all the more from non-violent resistance to active love for one another. The ethics inferred in these teachings is frankly impossible to follow in whole and in part, wouldn't one agree? "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" This makes no logical sense to us, right? In the words of my homiletics professor Dr. William Brosend "The ethically impossible is apparently the theologically outrageous!"

And finally, Jesus proclaims "Be perfect just as your Father is perfect" Here; Jesus is suggesting that the *Imago Dei* be taken very seriously, and also quite literally. *Imago Dei* is the Latin term for 'Image of God.' This theological doctrine asserts that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. This truism is also echoed in the Book of Genesis "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27 NRSV. We are created in the image of God. This is quite profound and even earth shaking when you really think about it! Yet, this is what makes it possible for us to live out lives of peace, love, and reconciliation because we are God's children.

In this narrative, Jesus is seeking not so much an improvement in our morality, but rather a re-forming of our theology. This is a challenge that He takes up time and again in the gospel of Matthew as an attempt to help us to understand what it means to understand God as “Our Father in heaven.” This reconstructed theology that Jesus is alluding to is intended to help us wholly understand that we are God’s children, God’s heirs, and also God’s flesh and blood. So...I would say that we have quite a lot to live up to, wouldn’t you!? Moreover, when Jesus states “Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” We are not capable of achieving perfection, or at least not perfection the way that we perceive it to be. To be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect simply means for us to be who we already are in God’s image – and who He created each of us ‘authentically’ to be. Jesus brings us back to this powerful and profound truth that we are God’s children and that we need to allow ourselves to embrace this beautiful and redemptive reality. Perhaps we may feel unworthy of accepting such a profound gift. After all, we are human, but this is where God’s grace comes in.

Paul reminds us of the gift of God’s grace in his letter to the Ephesians “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” Ephesians 2:4-10 NRSV. The gospel is all about God’s grace through Jesus Christ. That’s why Paul calls it “the gospel of the grace of God” and “the word of his grace” (Acts 20:24 & Acts 14:3). Grace is the most important concept in the Bible, Christianity, and the world, and is most clearly conveyed in the promises of God revealed in Scripture, and embodied in Jesus Christ. Grace is the love of God shown to each of us, though we may not consider ourselves to be worthy of such.

When we allow ourselves to openly receive the gift of grace that God so freely gives us, then we are able to see Him for who he truly is ‘Our Father in heaven.’ This grace will in turn open our eyes and our hearts with compassion, and prompt us to seek justice and peace for all people in a hurting world. As followers of Jesus we will be empowered by His love to transform our world little by little and day by day. For with God all things are possible.



