

“LIVING IN GOD’S WORLD

I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Introduction: We’re working our way through the Sermon on the Mount this summer. Some time ago, we preached on the Beatitudes which open Jesus’ sermon and as Janet mentioned when she began this series, I’ll remind you how important it is to remember that this vision of God’s kingdom begins with blessing: “Blessed are the poor... blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the meek... the peacemakers....” This morning’s reading is really the conclusion of a section that Janet read and talked about three weeks ago. Jesus seems to be proposing a much stricter interpretation of the law in the life of the disciple. It is not enough to refrain from murder, one must eliminate even the hate that resides in the heart. We pick up Jesus’ train of thought with some comments about the laws of retribution, what is referred to as *lex talionis*.

Read Matt. 5:38-48

These are beautiful words... difficult but beautiful. They call the followers of Jesus to let go of the demand for retribution when we have been wronged. They call us to a high standard of generosity. They demand that love of neighbor be extended even to the enemy. They ask of the child of God... perfection. Or do they expose our shortcomings, our failure to be the sort of disciple that Jesus desires?

These are beautiful words, but they are not words that we are inclined to take literally. We are reluctant to think that Jesus really means them. Greg Carey, a professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary, points to a history of interpretation that explains away Jesus’ words. People have said that Jesus doesn’t mean that we can achieve this high standard of behavior. He sets them out as something for his followers to aspire to... or as reminders of the impossibility of human righteousness, they prepare us for grace... or they’re intended only as a personal ethic impossible to realize in the complexities of the modern world... or they represent practical advice to powerless people. His words are either an exaggeration or an ideal that points us in the right direction but without any hope of perfectly doing them, or they are directed solely to an oppressed people as practical advice for making the most of a hopeless situation.

These are beautiful words... right up to the moment that we try to explain them. I mean, how do you make sense of “turn the other cheek” in a culture that rewards those who ruthlessly practice “getting ahead?” What sense does it make to allow oneself to be stripped naked in a society that honors the best dressed and raves over the beautiful? How can one talk about loving the enemy who is only too willing to blow up your sanctuaries or gun you down in the street? And how can we talk about perfection in a world whose mantra is: “nobody’s perfect.”

These are beautiful words... but not when we turn them into an impractical ideal, or excuse ourselves from living them out.

The first thing to recognize is the communal nature of Jesus’ more demanding ethic. The Ten Commandments lay out a series of actions that will break up the peace of community:

murder, adultery, and false witness for example. Jesus' new rules for the heart extends this principle from the actions we take to the intentions of the human heart. It isn't just murder that destroys community, but hatred does as well. It isn't just the act of retribution that breaks up harmony. Just the desire to get even is enough compromise the health of a community. It isn't enough to love our friends. Failure to soften our hearts toward the enemy will prevent a lasting peace from settling around the community.

Janet said that this new ethic addresses the quality of our relationships. All the "yous" are in the plural. The individual isn't absent or unimportant, but the end that Jesus has in mind is the health of the community. He's inviting his disciples to live into the world that God intends for us.

If you want to live in God's world, stop hating your brothers and sisters. Stop casting aside those whom you've promised to love. Stop trying to get even. Do even more than people ask of you. And the hardest but maybe the most important hurdle on the way to a healthy world, to the world intended by God: Start loving your enemy.

If this seems difficult, consider that Jesus lived this way. Refusing to hate anyone, he ate with sinners and prostitutes. He turned the other cheek. He turned away from taking vengeance. In Paul's letter to Rome we find the remarkable statement that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." In another letter we are told that Christ died for the ungodly, and in Corinthians we are referred to as "enemies of God." On the cross he looks at his accusers and oppressors and asks God to forgive them. He loved his enemies and prayed for those who persecuted him.

If you want to follow Jesus, you have to love your enemy. Jesus did it because he understood himself to be a child of God. And he calls us to do it because he knows that we are children of God. We have been, as Genesis tells us, made in the image of God. Loving the enemy is the defining mark of those who would follow Jesus, of those who consider themselves children of God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

Those who would live in God's world must love their enemies. Jesus doesn't say nor does he mean to say that we should try to love our enemies. He says "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He's serious and he means it, and we know he means it even though too often we settle for trying.

You're driving down the road, just a bit over the speed limit, when another car comes up quickly from behind, pulls around you and cuts you off before zipping down the road. Now maybe you don't think of such a person as the enemy. Probably you're more gracious than I am. Maybe you excuse them, assuming that they're late for an important meeting. I just consider them rude and on a bad day think of them as road terrorists, the enemy. Now I know that I'm not living in God's world when I curse their existence. Living in God's world I suppose I ought to have been praying that no harm results from their recklessness.

That's a trivial example, of course. With a little effort, you could easily train yourself to respond to similar offenses with a prayer instead of a curse. How to love the enemy, when the enemy is an unfaithful spouse, a violent criminal, or just a person from the other political party is a bit more challenging. But this is what children of God do. They figure out how to love the enemy. Salvation depends on it. Healthy community demands it.

This began to make more sense to me as I was reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, not exactly bed-time reading. She was a feminist existential philosopher. She makes the claim that authentic existence depends on the individual making choices that benefit others. I can only be free insofar as my actions also guarantee your freedom. Freedom only happens in community and community only happens as we consider the welfare of each other, even those we dislike or disagree with.

This is what Martin Luther King understood when he reminded all of us that hate will never bring about equal rights, that the civil rights movement was a struggle for the freedom of blacks and whites, that no one was truly free until all were free.

No matter how justified hatred may be, it will always exclude us from God's household. I cannot tell you how to love your enemy. Maybe it's enough to know that this is in fact what we are about as children of God.

I know it does happen, that we do experience God's world as we heal the rifts that separate us, that divide us into friends and enemies. I know that there are many times when we fall short of the standard, when we need to rely on God's grace, on the God who loves enemies all the time, on the God who welcomes us even at our stubborn worst. This grace supplies the courage and the example to return to the task.

Do I even need to say that we need each other's help for this, that loving our enemies requires a *community* committed to that task? Jesus speaks to a faith community, to a group of disciples because we help one another overcome our anger. Whether the sun shines or the rain falls, we are here for each other.

These are beautiful words, but they are nothing next to the love embodied in the faith community. Nothing compares to those moments of reality when we experience living in God's world where people refuse to be directed by hate, where injustice is resisted through generosity, where vengeance really is left to the Lord and where love is not restricted to the few but for all. This is how God is with us. This is what Jesus is for us. This is who we yet can be for one another. Amen.

Resources:

Greg Carey. article in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*
Simone de Beauvoir. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.