

Matthew 5:38-48

You may have heard the story told of a priest who was giving a homily on Jesus's command to love your enemies based on the Gospel lesson that we just heard today. "Now," the priest said, "I'll bet that many of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives, so raise your hands if you have many enemies." Quite a few people raised their hands. "Now raise your hands if you have only a few enemies." About half as many people raised their hands. "Now raise your hands if you have only one or two enemies." Even fewer people raised their hands. "See," said the priest, "most of us feel like we have enemies." "But raise your hand if you have no enemies at all." The priest looked around and around and then way in the back, a very, very old man raised his hand and stood up and said, "I have no enemies whatsoever!" Delighted, the priest invited the man to the front of the church. "What a blessing!" the priest said. "How old are you?" "I'm 98 years old, and I have no enemies." The priest said, "What a wonderful Christian life you lead! And tell us all how it is that you have no enemies." The man responded, "Well...all those jerks have died!" (One of the forgotten benefits of aging.)

This story begs the question - is it possible to live without enemies? To love our enemies? Because our Gospel lesson today with its call from Jesus not to resist evil, to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies is likely what has given rise to quotes like this one from GK Chesterton who said: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."

Maybe he's right. Because if we're going to take Jesus seriously, if we're going to say we are striving to follow Jesus and call ourselves Christians, then we have to reckon with his very difficult words in this passage from Jesus' most popular sermon- the Sermon on the Mount. And I don't know about you, but I would prefer it if Jesus had not said this. It feels impossible. I want to be able to write off the people who say mean things to me, I don't want to have to struggle and pray for them and ask God to help me love them anyway- I admit, I prefer the Leviticus passage that Jesus mentions that says: 'If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured someone, so it shall be inflicted on him.' This, my friends, is what we call

getting even. And this particular Scripture passage was actually written in order to limit revenge- because often when we are wronged, we don't just offer an equitable revenge, we take it one step further. You yelled me, now I will yell at you, but just a bit louder. You hit me, now I will hit you- but just a little harder. Or worse. And so the ancients at least tried to prevent the escalation of violence in this directive.

But Jesus, who, as we read last week, tells us that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, says we have to do better than that – revenge is not the way of Jesus or of his life, which we know lead to the cross. The follower of Jesus is called to love, not hate, our enemies. Instead of an eye for an eye, we are told not to resist the evildoer but to turn the other cheek. And so even though I wish Jesus had not said this, I know there is something to it – because, as Mohandas Gandhi once said, "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind."

I also know that I would never want God to deal with me fairly – if I always got just exactly what I deserved and there was no grace, I would be very worried. And so despite my internal struggle and protests with Jesus, I know, most of know and understand, there has to be a better way.

I have often wondered if perhaps part of the problem is our understanding of what Jesus was teaching us in this passage. A lot has been said about what it means to turn the other cheek. I believe the scholars who have determined that turning the other cheek was not about being a victim but of exposing the evil being done. If I am struck in the face and then offer the other side to my attacker- it offers them the opportunity to starkly see what they are doing and to stop and repent of it. Clearly if that doesn't cause them to pause then nothing will – but if our first response was not revenge but somehow blatantly exposing the evil being done, many events of escalating violence or hatred could be averted.

How we apply this concept will vary depending on the circumstances. To apply it we have to ask, not "how do I get even?" or "what is fair?" but "what will reveal and expose the truth of what happening most glaringly?". And to do so with the right intentions.

In the same way, I think we are often confused by what the Gospel means when Jesus speaks of love and loving our enemies. We think love involves a feeling – it doesn't. We also think that loving our enemies involves being a doormat – it doesn't. The word being used in this passage to describe love is "agape"- and in Greek it means to be "of good will" and to "wish well." In other words, it is an action and an act of the will.

And so I have always appreciated the way that Dr. Scott Peck defines love because it is so Biblical in its approach. He writes, "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth... Love is as love does. Love is an act of will -- namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love."

Anyone who has had to parent a child knows that love involves making your child unhappy daily. It means setting limits, saying no, allowing consequences to run their course, and challenging them when they are wrong. Yes, there are the precious moments of deep affection and of sweet and kind words and exchanges – we live for these, but these are the by-products of the difficult love we have to put into action each day for their long term best. A love based on emotion or feelings or mere passivity is a flimsy love and does not offer the strength and ferocity that real love calls us to in Christ.

How do we love our enemies? We love them by seeking their best – by praying for them, by refraining from the temptation to simply make revenge on them in order to expose the wrongs done in the light of love. It also involves a lot of personal introspection about our own wrongdoing.

I don't think we can love our enemies without God's help...but I truly believe we can love our enemies when we allow God to work in and through us when we choose to embrace love over hate. It is probably the hardest thing to do for us as humans. But I don't think it's impossible – because I have seen it in action. Mohandas Gandhi based his concept of non-violent resistance on these very teachings. Martin Luther King Jr. did the same.

Something else I think we forget when we talk about Jesus' call to love our enemies is that Jesus was in it to win. Jesus had no interest in losing. Jesus was in it to win. To win over his enemies, to win over our hearts and souls for God...to save us, each and every one of us, fully and completely. When we love others and love our enemies the way Jesus calls us to – we do it to win for the sake of truth, salvation, and righteousness. We do it because we want this world to be a better place: "Thy Kingdom come." It is not about passive resignation or indifference, it is about loving people so much that we refuse to give up or give in – we use every strategy that God has given us to right the wrongs and reconcile this world to the love of God in order to expose the truth. In an eye for eye no one wins- that is just a stalemate. Be in it to win. To win big.

President Abraham Lincoln, as you may know, appointed people that were considered enemies of his to positions on his cabinet, if he believed them to be the best person for the job. This attitude made it possible for Lincoln to speak a kind word about the South even during the Civil War when he was feeling most bitter. Asked by a shocked bystander how he could do this, Lincoln said, "Madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" We desperately need the tools and the weapons that God has given in Christ today more than ever. Be in it to win. Be in it to destroy evil and enmity and to reveal God's truth in our confused world. Because victory is found in the way of love.

Amen.