

Loving without Limits

Matthew 5:38-48
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The phrases we find in the Sermon on the Mount are so familiar and poetic that we can forget sometimes how demanding they really are. We know these idioms by heart- phrases like "Turn the other cheek," "Go the Extra Mile," "Love your enemies"... And these are all lovely sayings, most hit close to home but...how... impossibly challenging. I mean "love your enemies?"... Really? Respond to the fist by opening yourself up to... more fists? ...and then the metaphorical cherry on top, the **command** to *be perfect*. How impossible, we say, and move further away from the text. What a nice thought, how aspirational, we think, as we close our Bibles and return to our daily lives.

Jesus often says things that make us struggle; His words challenged the disciples every moment of every day, when He asked them, as He asks us, to do things that seem contrary to human nature. We struggle both with this command and our certain failure in following it. We remove ourselves from the action thinking if we can't make a grand display, change something on a global or national scale in our world, why try at all. "Be perfect." "Love your enemies." "Give to everyone who begs of you."...a tall order for people in Jesus' time and a tall order for us today.

Jesus knew this, but his philosophy of radical love has its basis in ancient roots. We see Jesus referring to the law being retaliatory in nature (hence "eye for an eye"), a law attempting to introduce an enforcement of fair justice among the people in ancient Israel. Wherever harm was committed--whether intentional or not intention-the leaders of ancient Israel were expected to enforce this law as a means of retaliation. This law or command was to be practiced in all cases. It was considered a law that expressed a commitment to justice... And it ensured that the penalty for wrongdoing was not whimsical meaning the punishment was not more severe than the trespass. And here is where Jesus got radical- Jesus asked followers *not* to retaliate. Jesus was challenging followers not to ascribe to the agenda of violence...to question those in power by resisting the "eye for an eye" agenda.

"Love your neighbor" (5:43), a theme so central to Jesus' teaching that he will repeat it in Matthew 19 and 22. In both later instances, the phrase is essential to articulating what Jesus thinks about the commandments God gives. Jesus pushes the nature of what God commands into a broader understanding- the all-encompassing, all-loving God we know so well today. Jesus' radical loving was a serious challenge- where he understood that people could not so easily love those who harm and shame them. This counter-intuitive act requires prayer as we see in the passage.

Loving, praying for, and forgiving one's enemy is an extension of Jesus' broader teaching about the perfection of God (5:48). This is the type of emotional maturity Jesus desires from his followers. Jesus' teaching stems from a firm belief that since God is perfect, so should we be. Just as God provides good things for the just and unjust, we are commanded treat others from any spectrum with consistent love. Care for the other--despite the other's actions--sums up the language of perfection...of maturity.

Theologian Jason Byassee comments that Jesus here is "at his ornery best offering 'advice' that makes no sense divorced from the nature of the one that is giving it" (*Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol. 1*). Here, Jesus is awakening a generation of people for old interpretation of the commandment served as a burden and obligation. These commandments or laws were only associated with the powerful leaders who were strict guardians of its measured and concise following.

These at least the ones we bump into in the Gospels, had become disconnected from God and the people, at the hands of the Law. Here, Jesus encourages a reinterpretation and that interpretation breathes new life, and encourages a broadening of scope of loving one's neighbor as a response to loving God. In doing so, Jesus is criticizing the contemporary interpretation of his time as incomplete...an interpretation of a commandment that brings people into a transformational relationship with God.

This device "you have heard it said/but I say to you" urges us to pay attention as Jesus deepens the meaning of these commandments. In many ways, "an eye for an eye" and "love your neighbors but hate your enemies" sounds more appealing to our sensibilities and our need for swift justice. Jesus is clear but infinitely more difficult to follow, since the obligation lies in requiring more from the self and from the redeemed community he is gathering.

Jesus is inviting the disciples and the eventual crowds to consider embracing a life that does indeed counter the instincts we have for survival. He is challenging our survivalist brain to go beyond our basic instincts and to raise our sights and join him in creating a more compassionate world, and to create among us a true community of respect based on the action of giving through radical love.

As Jesus teaches, the seeds of a new creation, a new community are sown. One that does not one that will transform the nature of humanity. A community that loves without limitations...without boundaries as Christ does through his sacrifice of his death and resurrection.

From his teaching... what if, instead, our communities were inescapable from the seeds of this new community, of justice, of peace rather than of fear, violence, and retaliation. A new community of faith that radically embraces and demonstrates the limitless love that God has shown us.

In honor of Black History Month, we look at the radical love that Jesus challenges us in the communities of people exemplified in the face of oppression, hostility, and violence. In 1955, the modern civil rights movement was effectively launched with the arrest of young seamstress Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama because of her refusal to give up her seat to a white person on a city bus. After the arrest, the black communities throughout the city joined together in a massive rally outside one of the city's Baptist churches to hear the young preacher Martin Luther King Jr. speak out against segregation, Parks' arrest, and the unjust law she had violated.

Waves of non-violent protests sparked throughout the 1950s and 60s. All of these were centered from the idea of facing hostility with boundless love- of loving one's enemy. Rev. Dr. King professed love for the oppressors saying that, "To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you" (*Radical King*).

The Civil rights movement was people-centered. It was the choice, every moment of every day, for people facing these dire circumstances, living under unjust laws, to make the choice to follow Christ's command of seeding a new community. They lived out those words through their actions from sit ins in Greensboro and Nashville to the Freedom Riders travelling throughout the Deep South... from the march on Washington to the march on Selma the communities of people who struggled through the movement met the actions of hostility, violence, and oppression with love and non-violence. Deliberately challenging the unjust actions of the powers that be with love rather than giving in to the agenda of retaliatory violence.

It is from Jesus' words that Rev. Dr. King developed the practice of non-violence as a means of effective resisting a culture that is unjust. Just as Jesus reinterpreted the biblical laws for his day, King put Jesus' theology into practice as relevance toward his own time and place. For King and others, Jesus' words were meant to be taken literally... a plan to retaliate evil with love was central to King's mission.

How like the actions of communities from the civil rights movement are the seeds of a new creation...a new community that Jesus announces today are grown...an invitation to transformational way of living in the midst of the old. As we embrace this transformation, we can find ourselves taking important steps to overturning the ways of alienation and separation, by practicing the kind of faith Jesus talks of in a hostile and unforgiving world. In time, we may just find that we have begun to shatter the old way so that the new community Jesus preached can flourish and breathe new life.

The final sentences of our Bible passage today have also caused some confusion. The directive to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" has cause anxiety as we struggle toward perfection, as we imagine God being perfect. In our own fallible view, perfection can stem from physical beauty and intellectual acumen, to spiritual heroics of all kinds. However as theologian Fred Craddock observes, "'Perfect' can also be translated 'complete' or 'mature.' It is not here referring to moral flawlessness but to love that is not partial or immature" (*Preaching through the Christian Year A*).

To be perfect is to love in the way God loves, to practice the way of compassion and giving as God has modeled it to us in Jesus. A love that can transcend the frequent yet often petty differences, disagreements, or downright hostility that erupt between us. Because this perfection, this complete-ness, has to do with love, which is a giving action, it is geared toward the other, and has little to do with our fallible concepts of perfection. In fact, the perfect life might just be seen as the life of love for God, for others, and for self that brings us into meaningful relationships within and out of our context. This leads to wholeness and completeness in all aspects of life not by focusing on the self but by embracing an expansive love for the other.

This passage is not merely an exhortation of self-sacrifice for achieving a greater good but Jesus would not call these individuals to a quiet resignation that assumes nothing will change, or that justice fails. That would be the passive interpretation- the temptation that we, as modern readers, have to close our Bibles and think, "Wouldn't it be great if we could all turn the other cheek? Return hate with love?"

Instead, Jesus calls us to be active participants in this radical love. Jesus rejects the ways we tend to flex our power. Seizing upon and taking advantage of the weakness of others. Jesus here calls us to reject those all too human ways of being. Instead, he calls us to resist the powerful not by wielding their weapons against them but by rejecting the very premises of the power they wield.

Rather, Jesus calls us to radical love. A love that is as expansive as God's love that God has for us...calling us to a love without any limitations...a love full of grace and reconciliation.

Maybe it's because Jesus knows the nature of us too well. He understands the expansiveness of our hatred taking hold and limits that our love for others can be. Jesus sees this in us but also notices potential. He sees how God's love takes hold and transforms us and sees how broken relationships are mended as the Spirit moves among us. He sees that justice and love can reign whenever we love our neighbors, no matter who they are.

All honor and praise be to God.