

Sunday, February 23, 2014
Matthew 5:38-48
Perfectly Imperfect
Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Today is our final look at the Sermon on the Mount before our worship swings fully into the celebration of Mardi Gras with next week's Jazz Worship followed by Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent. This weekend feels a little like that last full week of school before Summer Break begins. But we sit here in the quiet of a rainy morning, not yet to the point of the city's revelry mixing with the stuff of worship. And we have one last lesson from the Sermon on the Mount to receive.

We've spent weeks now listening to the words of Jesus and considering what the heart of his message is and how we are invited to embody that message in our lives. Jesus' famous collection of teachings brings beautiful and challenging words to us modern listeners. Some leave us hopeful about our true identity as people created in the image of God, others shine a light on our need to be better and truer today than we were yesterday. Those challenging words pinch and push and don't come easy.

It's likely for those very reasons that I have fought this week's text hardest of them all. The commands of Jesus are too challenging, too personal, too impossible. As I have read and reread Jesus' words to love your enemies and pray for those who curse you, I have felt a personal sting of the past and present times when I don't want to do that.

My brother Daniel and I often share a 16 second YouTube clip with each other from the show *Seinfeld* when we've had one of those days—the kind of days when you just shake your head and can't believe the scenarios you're replaying in your mind. In this particular *Seinfeld* episode, Elaine is over at Jerry's apartment, and they're complaining about people who annoy them.

Jerry: What about these nitwits who get on a plane with nothing to read? You know who these people are?

Elaine: Who?

Jerry: These are the people that want to talk to you. They got nothing else to do. Why not disturb you?

Elaine: I will NEVER understand people.

Jerry: They're the worst.

People. They're the worst!

Sometimes they are. Sometimes I am. And today's passage in Matthew 5 invites us into those innocent and not-so-innocent moments when we want to think the worst of people but are called, instead, to love. And to pray. And to strive for Godly perfection.

The first half of today's text has political undertones that were specific to Jesus' time, and his instructions to his followers turn feasible scenarios of force into opportunities to express Divine power. Turn the cheek, give the coat, walk the miles. Each of these instructions is about communicating a truer power than Rome and recognizing that God is not in the revenge business.

Douglas Hare writes, "Turning the other cheek is not urged as a strategy for altering the enemy's behavior. Jesus' passion amply illustrated the truth that this is seldom an effective strategy" ...[These sayings] "are meant to shock the imagination and instill a profounder insight into God's intention. The old ways of retaliation and self-protection must give way to a gentler, more magnanimous approach to those we deem enemies."¹

The nuance of these instruction from Jesus is interesting but not terribly personal. We don't typically walk around thinking in terms of bitter enemies. And while we have a caustic political climate in our country, we live in comfort and peace and are not literally facing enemies in the street as we go from place to place, as they have been in Ukraine.

So it's the second half of the morning's passage that gets stickier. It's the call to love and prayer and perfection that challenges the darkest parts of you and me.

As has been the case through all of the Sermon on the Mount, it is impossible to live in this way. It is easy to say love your neighbor up to a point, and that point varies for each of us. That "point" likely depends on the neighbor who is named. Eventually, we're not nearly as magnanimous as we would like to pretend. We're smug, proud, and unbending.

¹Douglas Hare, *Interpretation:Matthew*, pp. 57-58

We easily dismiss one another, “People. They’re the worst!”

Jesus’ words today require us to face those reactions that distance us from another’s full humanity and that allow us to never consider a person’s struggle and story.

In recent weeks, I found myself twice gathered around lunch tables with lovely people when high profile court cases around bribery and kickbacks were being discussed. Over lunch with Uptown clergy, the verdict in the Ray Nagin case was read aloud on tv. The restaurant where we sat became silent as count after count was read aloud: guilty, guilty, guilty, not guilty, guilty, guilty until all 21 were read. Some restaurant patrons chuckled, many told stories of Nagin’s management before and after Katrina, then the voice of Rabbi Cohn stood out, “This is just so sad. I don’t delight in this verdict at all. How sad for him that it has all come to this.”

Last week I joined Dick Randels at the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission’s annual meeting. Story after story was shared, awards were given for excellence in legal practice and criminal justice. Then Judge Kenneth Polite, Jr. stood as the last speaker and something like this: “We acknowledge the excellent work of many today, but we do not celebrate the work itself. Instead we acknowledge that our work exists because the world is still not as it should be, and there is much yet to be done to heal our society.”

These are glimpses of what love looks like. Love does not delight in wrongdoing or in the suffering of another. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not arrogant or rude. These are the ways that God loves, and Jesus instructs his followers to live up to that standard.

As I have wrestled with today’s text, I have come to three conclusions.

1. If we ever hope to love like God, we must see ourselves as holy. We are God’s children. We must live as what we have been called.

The idea of being perfect is crippling for many of us. We get lost and sidetracked in our lives because we are chasing some notion of perfection. To love as God loves, we first have to understand this idea of perfection. Perfection, as our society defines it, is arbitrary. It’s the perfect party, the perfect dress, the perfect career, the perfect portfolio, the perfect spouse. It’s arbitrary, ephemeral, and vapid. That kind of perfection bears no permanence. What Jesus is talking about is holiness—we are to be holy as God is holy, we are to be complete, whole, carry God’s shalom in us.

John Wesley wrote, “Christian perfection, therefore, does not imply (as some...seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or

temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus every one that is perfect is holy, and every one that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect.”²

Perhaps the idea is not just our striving to reflect God’s perfect grace but that God’s mercy and compassion is so perfect that it even covers us when we are unloving, unkind, unholy. When we are striving to be people of light but give in, instead, to our darkness, God’s light still shines brightly enough to illumine all of us. And even when we aren’t trying hard at all, and we’re intentionally unkind and unloving, God’s mercy and compassion still covers our unthankful hearts.

“Maybe it will help to talk about the *principle* of holiness,” writes John Jewell, “as opposed to the *practice* of holiness. When all of us leave here today, we are leaving as persons of faith who belong to God because we are children of God. We are *in principle* holy persons. In order to answer the call of God as expressed by Moses, ‘*You shall be holy... for I am holy...*’ we need to live out in the real world the meaning of being God’s people.”

Perhaps that is the difficulty with this idea of being holy. We don’t have so much trouble with thinking about the church and all that is in it as being holy when we leave it all behind and return to our homes and our lives. And...we might attribute a bit of holiness to clergy. But when I leave church, I don’t think of *me* as being holy.

“Here’s a brief and necessarily oversimplified definition of what it means to be holy:

To be holy as God is holy is to live our lives in the world, fully conscious of the fact that we are in the world as representatives of the God to whom we belong. We seek to grow in the great commandment to love God completely in heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbor (whoever and wherever they may be) as we love ourselves.

In other words, to be a holy person is... to be a person who loves God and loves *like* God loves.”³

² John Wesley, *Christian Perfection*

³ John Jewell, 2002: <http://www.lectionarysermons.com/Oct27-02.htm>

2. If we ever hope to love like God, we need a community that maintains holiness for us when we, as individuals, fail.

When we find ourselves incapable of moving forward as kind, forgiving, loving people, that is when we need each other. We need the friend to call and say, “I’ve heard about this conflict between you and this other person. Can I get together with the two of you? Can we talk? Can we try to pour a little oil on this thing and heal it?”

We mutter and mumble, roll our eyes and think some unkind thoughts, but then we have the opportunity to say yes. We accept the friend and the oil, and we enter into the hard conversations. Maybe it won’t end with restoration in a relationship, but it will, at the very least, bring healing within ourselves. When we allow that holy friendship to shape us, we accept the generosity of a loved one in our community. We open ourselves up to vulnerability and being our truest, most honest selves. We call one another to love. We welcome the notion of our own holiness. And on an average day, if nothing else is accomplished, that’s a pretty beautiful moment.

3. If we want to love like God, we must pray for our enemies and our shortcomings.

Only through steady prayer can we ever hope to live into our holiness.

“‘Love your neighbor’ (5:43) is central to Jesus’ teaching and he will repeat it on two other occasions in Matthew (19:19; 22:39). In both later instances, the phrase is central to what Jesus thinks about the entire Law of God. As he says to one inquiring lawyer, ‘On these two commandments (i.e., love God; love neighbor) hang all the law and the prophets’ (22:40). Here, in chapter 5, Jesus extends this love towards the ‘enemy.’ Of course, people cannot so easily love those who harm and shame them. This counter-intuitive act requires prayer. So, Jesus advocates praying for enemies (5:44). Such practice beforehand will benefit a person’s right action in life. In the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ (6:9-13), this idea is consonant with the theme of forgiveness: forgiving others who have wronged you is crucial to receiving God’s forgiveness as well (6:14-15).

Loving, praying for, and forgiving one’s enemy,” writes Emerson Powery, “is an extension of Jesus’ broader teaching about the perfection of God (5:48). In typical fashion, Jesus provides an intriguing image to capture the meaning of this quality of God, one that God’s followers should emulate. Later in Matthew’s story, Jesus confronts a rich man, who has faithfully followed the commandments of his religious tradition (cf. 19:16-22). This man still recognizes that something is missing (19:20). Jesus’ response is shocking: ‘sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor’ (19:21). Like most of us, this man can’t carry out that challenge. Only in Matthew’s account is such an action classified as what it means to be ‘perfect’ (*teleios*; 19:21). This is the type of maturity Jesus desires from his followers. Jesus’ teaching stems from a theological conviction that since God is perfect, so should the followers of

God be. Just as God provides good things (i.e., "rain") for the just and the unjust, so must God's followers treat others (whether "good" or "evil") with consistent love (5:45). Care for the other--despite the other's actions--sums up the language of perfection, maturity, and fulfillment in life."⁴

Our perfection, our holiness, comes in fits and starts as we seek to live into that identity. We don't reach a point of finally getting it right. The best we can hope for are moments of getting it right. Even better, maybe the best we can hope for is that at any given moment, someone in this community is getting it right while the rest of us fail. There are the times when we stand up with activists' voices and cry out against injustice. There are thin places in worship or conversation when all is as it should be for just the length of a breath. But then there are the times when we need to be changed from the inside first, and all we can do is pray.

Perhaps this prayer may become your own:

O God, forgive me for the words I mutter under my breath and the accusations I hurl in my mind. Love my enemy for me when I cannot just yet. Forgive me for being so steadily unloving. Forgive me for berating myself for my imperfection, my human-ness.

I want to love abundantly and graciously, I want to be filled with kindness and bravery. But sometimes, you know O God, I am none of those things.

Teach me to love myself even when I don't like myself very much. Whisper to me to try again when I think I'm incapable of change. Make me holy like you are holy. Remind me that I am your beloved child, made in your image. I do not need to chase after your holiness, I bear its impression on my soul.

Bring goodness to my enemy's life. Bring your flourishing peace into the dark places of their days. When I am tempted to dismiss people out of frustration or to delight in their shortcomings, bless me with the gifts of community—a holy friendship that challenges me to do what is hard and to speak in love.

As I grow into your loving ways, may my love be patient and kind. May I leave behind my envy and arrogance. Teach me to no longer insist on my own way. May I not rejoice when someone suffers. Whisper to me: delight in truth, bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. Teach me, O God, to love. Amen.

⁴ Emerson Powery: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=840