

**...But I Say**  
**Cooke's-Portsmouth**

**February 19, 2017**

**Matthew 5: 38-48**

When I looked at the lectionary readings for today I did not want to preach on the gospel. It is a demanding one to say the least: turn the other cheek; always go the extra mile; never walk by a person begging and turn a blind eye; love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you; if you love only those who love you, then you are not setting yourself apart from the non-believer. Be perfect. We know that perfection is impossible and to walk the fine line of Christian faith is demanding at the best of times let alone at the worst of times like extending the laurel to one who despises us and has made our lives difficult. I read the gospel and said, "I don't want to ponder this demanding text for a week or have to reflect on it on Sunday." So I turned to the Hebrew lesson from Leviticus.

Leviticus too has its nigglesome texts that I prefer to steer clear of. As I read the lectionary for this morning I began to get a sense of how it is that we might apply the teaching from the Sermon on the Mountain if we incorporated the simple, but no less demanding, teaching from Leviticus 19. In simple, straight forward rendering of many of the commandments Moses reminds the people how to live as those set apart.

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Rendered down Moses is reminding the people to feed the hungry; respect another's property; to be impartial and kind in your judgements of others. Do not be cruel to those who are challenged or make them objects of jokes. Do not hate. So if we feed the hungry, try to be as impartial as is humanly possible, treat those who struggle with the same respect that we want to be treated and let go of the residual anger when we have been wounded, slandered or embarrassed by another then we are living the tenets of the law. But Jesus also knew all this; knew it better than most and for him this was not sufficient. And he put narrower perimeters on the teaching.

You have heard it said, but now I say. Maintaining the status quo is not sufficient. Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Love your enemies. Be perfect as God is perfect.! It is beyond our understanding how it is even possible to do this. My commentary teaches that the point of the sermon is not that we are to confess that such demands will only lead to failure to comply. The point of the sermon is teaching that we are to love as God loves: without partiality; without

reservation or condition. This cannot be done out of our own resources. So the teaching is not an admonition to simply try harder. The sermon is a portrait of the heart of God who loves the unlovable, lives among creation as Christ who offer his own cheek to be slapped, suffers the worst and seeks forgiveness with his dying breath. If you choose to follow the God fleshed in Jesus you will find yourself adopted into a life of loving this way: turning the cheek; going the extra mile; loving those who despise you; praying for those who make your life miserable; and setting yourself apart in the doing. It comes as second nature to some; for many of us not so much.

Most of us can bring to the fore the name of an enemy: someone that we do not like and we can probably recall the circumstances that lead to the breakdown of the relationship. When we have been wronged, embarrassed, slandered or wounded our natural instinct is to retaliate. We may not attest to placing much literal credence in the eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but at some level of our consciousness we hope for our enemies to be humiliated, exposed as frauds or punished as bullies. Mahatma Ghandi once said: An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind. And we have witnessed the result of blindness.

What the world needs now is to truly see the ramifications of protectionism, bigotry, power and ego. We need to see as God sees; with eyes that love the world and hearts that long to tenderly care for the world and her people in all of their diversity. To truly pray in earnest for those who persecute because if we love only those who love us in return we are not deserving of reward. And if we do not step outside of our comfort zone then we are no better than the unfaithful. This is a difficult text to wrestle with in this age of protectionism, paranoia and terrorism in which we live.

Jesus and his followers lived under Roman occupation so it was pretty clear who the enemy was. In our generation the enemy is more illusive and widespread.

David Lose has written of this text: One key observation here: the word we translate “perfect” is actually the Greek word *telos* and implies less a moral perfection than it does reaching one’s intended outcome. The *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of a peach tree is to yield peaches. Which means that we might translate this passage more loosely to mean, “Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be.”

Read and interpreted this way, Jesus’ words are less command than promise. God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for you. God intends to use you to achieve something spectacular. And that something spectacular is precisely to be who you were created to be and, in so doing, to help create a different kind of world. Jesus calls this new world the kingdom of God – where violence doesn’t always breed more violence and hate doesn’t always kindle more hate. Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the logic of Jesus’ kingdom well when he stated, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

There is a thought provoking and moving scene in the movie Ghandi, and while I have no way of knowing for sure that the exchange actually took place, it is readily believable that given Ghandi’s personality that it could have. Ghandi has been going without food to encourage Muslim and Hindus to stop fighting in New Delhi. A Hindu man comes to his bedside and thrusts a piece of bread at the emaciated leader and begs him to eat and live. He confesses that he is going to hell. Muslims had killed his young son and in an act of retaliation he took a Muslim

child and sacrificed him Ghandi responds, "I know a way out of hell."

Find a Muslim child whose parents have been killed in the fighting and take him into your home and raise him as your son; only raise him as a Muslim. The viewer never knows if the grieving Hindu father follows Ghandi's advice but the scene illustrates just how demanding it can be to love one's enemy. But more importantly it illustrates how the cycle of retaliation can only be stopped by altruism of the highest order; highest to the point of Godlikeness.

We will never truly love as God loves, and yet we have been tutored in scripture in how to try. It is by loving our enemies; demonstrating tolerance; praying for those who persecute so that we might better understand their angst and perhaps cause hatred to melt. We are to do more than the minimum that is asked of us by going the extra mile. We are not to walk by anyone who begs, even if our hands are perpetually in our pockets as we make our way down Main Street. And we are not to be protectionist of our belongings. If anyone asks to borrow from us we are not to fret about a treasure being lost or unreturned. No small task for most of us who take pride in what we have worked hard to own.

But as long as we place possessing higher than sharing; retaliating over forgiveness; teasing another for those things over which they can exercise no control; doing the least rather than the most we are not reflecting the modeling of the one who suffers to redeem and dies to atone. The one who preached then and now "You have heard it said, but I say."

I say love rather than hate.

Pray rather than retaliate.

Embrace minimalism and part with those things that are superfluous to need.

Do more than is expected.

Treat strangers with respect and do not see them as a threat.

Strive to be perfect and to reflect the unconditional grace of God. Amen.