

“What the World Needs Now...”

Matthew 5: 38 – 48

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In today’s scripture commentary from the book “Feasting on the Word”, Greg Carey, professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania shares this story:

“Stumbling into the kitchen after a long day of work, I put down my groceries and pressed the voice-mail button. It was my ten-year-old daughter Erin. “Dad, I’m liturgist at church Sunday, and I have that passage where Jesus says, “Turn the other cheek.” You know that passage, right Dad? Do the other Gospels have that same passage? Is it different in the other Gospels? Could you let me know, because...no offense, Dad, but I think Jesus is wrong.” (“Feasting” Year A, Vol. 1. P. 381)

“Turn the other cheek”? NO! Hit ‘em harder! Stand up for yourself! Don’t show weakness! The words of Jesus, “Do not resist an evildoer” certainly go against the popular bumper sticker that reads, “I don’t get mad...I get even!” 10 year old Erin isn’t alone. I would imagine that a number of Jesus’ followers echo her words, “I think Jesus is wrong”, or, if not wrong then just not practical, an idealist that is pointing toward a heavenly realm that has nothing to do with earthly living.

Or, does this passage have everything to do with how to live together on this earth and maybe even hold the key to what can ultimately save us?

We tend to read or hear these words and apply them to individual relationships. And there is some good in doing that. We can remember that stooping low, playing into insults and injury, although giving some satisfaction in the moment, not only are not usually productive but are not how we as people of faith are called to respond. And I dare say that in this time in which we find ourselves, in the midst of a divided country where party loyalty seems stronger than nation, these words would apply as well. And a reminder that we are not called to respond tit for tat.

No, not just give up or roll over or ignore and hope everything will go away. It may be helpful to remember, especially in the days in which we find ourselves now, that Jesus and years later Matthew in his writing, were addressing a community of faith living in and often persecuted by Empire.

At first glance, the words of Jesus to turn the other cheek, to give a second coat, to walk an extra mile, seem to suggest that one is to go along with an evildoer, to be passive, to give in. But there is more going on here. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek” which would mean most likely that the person doing the striking was using the right hand for a back handed slap of insult...do not strike back with another insult. If one asks for your coat, give them your second garment as well, leaving yourself naked and them in the wrong. If you are asked by a Roman soldier to carry their bags a mile, go a second mile, voluntarily. Do not play the opponent’s adversarial game, one author writes. Do not fight fire with fire, fight fire with water.

Not resisting, non resistance, is not necessarily passive. It can be active. We don't have to look too far back in history to see these words lived out. Gandhi and followers in India stood up against the British in passive, nonviolent, creative ways as did Martin Luther King Jr and followers during the Civil rights movement. Not meeting insult and injury with the same. Instead, they stood their ground in peaceful, creative nonviolent protest of injustice.

And if only our reading for today stopped there, but there's that second part, that part about love, "You have heard it say, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy' but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you". It is to this part that surely little 10 year old Erin's words are true, "Daddy, I think Jesus is wrong!."

Love our enemies? Oh we don't have enemies! Really? Let's look at this passage again. Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Notice how he doesn't say, "As a nice person of faith, you shouldn't really have enemies." No, there is an unfortunate reality here, that in life we most often do have enemies, or, if that is too harsh of a word then we will have people who wish us harm or believe in a way of being that we think is hateful, harmful, etc. No enemies? What about ISIS? Fred Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church? Those in our government, both newly appointed and decade long senate seat holders whose actions and policies go against everything that you or I stand for? Well, maybe we do have a few enemies....that we are called to *love*?

Decades ago I lived, as many of you know, in an internal refugee camp in El Salvador during their brutal civil war in the 1980s. My role was to accompany, to be with the people in the camp who were civilians who had fled from and still targeted by government troops. While there I heard many – too many – stories of the human rights abuses and atrocities committed by the U.S. backed government soldiers. One day I was with a friend, another North American, and her four year old adopted daughter from Guatemala. We were in her car, she was driving, another friend who we had just picked up from the airport was in the front seat, little four year old Marianna and I were in the back seat. We were traveling along, enjoying the countryside when all of a sudden, as we rounded a bend, we saw a roadblock ahead. Government soldiers, with automatic rifles slung over their backs, were stopping cars. As my friend slowed the car, and as we reached for our identification papers, my mouth went dry and my stomach lurched. There, ahead, was the 'enemy'. All three of us were nervous, wondering if we would be detained for questioning because we were church workers helping the poor and therefore labeled subversives. As we stopped, the soldier in charge barked out orders to see our papers with an angry look on his face. Just then, little four year old Marianna leaned over me so that she could see his face in the window, she gave him the biggest smile, waved and shouted out 'Hola!' 'Hello!'. His angry demeanor crumbled into a matching smile. It was then that I saw this soldier not as the enemy but as the 15 or 16 year old boy that he was. He was not 'the other' but, like me, loved by God as God's child.

Theologian Henri Nouwen, in his book "Seeds of Hope", reflects on the command to 'love our enemies'. He writes, " What my enemy deserves is not my anger, rejection, resentment, or disdain, but my love. Spiritual guides throughout history have said that love for the enemy is the cornerstone of the message of Jesus and the core of holiness. For us fearful people, loving our enemy is the greatest challenge, because our fears make us divide the world between people who are for us and people who are against us, people to love and people to hate, friends and enemies."

He goes on, “All these distinctions are based on the illusion that others decide who we are and that our very being depends on their words, thoughts, and actions. Loving our enemy thus compels us to unmask this illusion by acting according to the knowledge that God loves all human persons with the same bold, unconditional love.”

Our behavior toward another is not to be determined by who the other is, whether the other is a friend or an enemy. Our behavior toward another is determined by our realization that God loves us and them equally.

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love.” How many decades have we been singing that song? And when the line is drawn and the sides are so polarized as they are today in our country between us and them, we need it even more today. Not love as a sentimental feeling, but love that recognizes the person in the other, that opens one's heart in empathy and compassion for the other, that does not exchange insult or harm to the other. A love that calls us from its opposite poison – that of hate.

Remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? He said,

“I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems,” King said. “I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate. ... I have decided to love.”

May this be our decision as well as we come to God in prayer.

Gracious and loving God,

We first pause to give you thanks for the gift of this day, for the gift of this community of faith, for the gift of your love that, as we are reminded in scripture has not ‘us and them’.

God in this time of division, how we need these words of direction and healing;

How we need you to step in to stop the revenge/getting even that is happening both on our streets and in our government offices. Help us to set aside ego, to let go of personal insults and gossip, to have the desire to both stand up for justice while at the same time treating those deemed our enemy with respect. It's hard, God, almost impossible, we so need to stop, center ourselves and follow your guidance.

Fill us with the sentiment of Martin Luther King Jr, that we have seen too much hate and have decided to love.

At the same time, God, fill us with resolve to stand fast against injustices and insults to the poor and marginalized, show us the way of nonresistance that is active, and give us the humility and wisdom to listen and learn even from those we may consider our enemy.