

Love Your Enemies
Matthew 5:38-48
January 29, 2023
Kory Wilcoxson

There used to be a skit on Saturday Night Live where the two co-anchors of Weekend Update, Seth Myers and Amy Poehler, would make fun of a celebrity who was making news for their inexplicable actions or outlandish statements. For example, they would say, “Really, Elon Musk? You tried to buy a pack of gum with a thousand-dollar bill? Really?” Or, “Really, politicians? To access my online bank account, I have to remember 52 pieces of personal information, including the name of my first pet’s boyfriend’s street address, and you can’t keep track of classified documents? Really?” The segment was called, “Really?”

Based on our passage for today, I wonder if Seth and Amy would do a “Really?” segment on Jesus. “Really, Jesus? When we’re slapped in the face we’re supposed to turn the other cheek? And if someone sues the pants off us, we’re supposed to give them our shirt, too? Really, Jesus? We’re supposed to lend to everyone who asks, regardless of their credit history? Really? We’re supposed to love those who hate us? We’re supposed to be perfect like God? Really, Jesus?”

Did Jesus really mean to cause this much trouble when he said these words? There are people who walk away from Christianity because this concept seems nonsensical in our world today. Did Jesus know just how hard these commands would be for us to carry out? This passage comes at the end of a section of the Sermon on the Mount called the antitheses, where Jesus takes the law of the Torah and reinterprets it for his audience. “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder’ but I say to you...” Jesus recasts the teachings on murder, adultery, divorce, false oaths and then, in our passage, Jesus takes on the concepts of justice and vengeance. “Love your enemies.” Really, Jesus?

We could try to explain these away by saying they are antiquated teachings that applied to Jesus’ time but not to ours. After all, there’s plenty in the Bible that could be characterized as chronologically contextual. For example, we are no longer an agrarian society, so all those parables about farmers and weeds and vineyards don’t really carry as much meaning. Maybe these passages can be explained away by saying they meant something to Jesus’ hearers but not as much to us. It was easy to love your enemies back then, but not so much today. “Look, Jesus, I’ll go to church and give some money and pray before a meal, but you don’t know how hard my enemies are to love. This is going a little too far.”

Let’s take Jesus’ words one section at a time to try and make sense of it, and we’ll end with his call for us to “be perfect.” I’m saving that for last because I hope by the time we get to it you’ll have stopped listening so it won’t matter if I can explain it or not. First, Jesus addresses the famous “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” line. This phrase appears in the Torah Law at least three times and was an essential part of how justice was to be carried out. It can also be found in many other ancient statements of justice like the Code of Hammurabi, so it had some level of universal applicability. And yet, it seems barbaric to us. As Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”

But the purpose of the original law wasn’t to encourage revenge; it was to limit it. In the ancient tribal culture, revenge was not commensurate. You steal my chickens, I kill 30 of your villagers. Considering the price of eggs today, that may be understandable. What the law did was take the responsibility for revenge out of the hands of individuals and gave it to the judicial

system. It limited criminal cases to no more than the loss suffered, and was usually meted out monetarily, not literally. This was not a savage law, it was actually a law of mercy.

And yet, Jesus takes it to the extreme. He says not only should we not seek justice, but when we're insulted or slapped in the face we should give our aggressors another opportunity. "Wait, you missed a cheek!" Which sounds to me a bit...wimpy. Really, Jesus? That just doesn't seem fair, does it? We have a strong sense of right and wrong, and when we're wronged, we should be allowed to make it right, either on social media or in a courtroom or through channels of gossip.

No, Jesus says. It's not our job to distribute justice. To be people of God, he says, we must renounce our right to retaliation. So much for, "Don't mad; get even." But think about it. You hit me, then I hit you, then you hit me, then I hit you...where does it stop? Instead of meeting force with force and might with might, Jesus says we are the ones to break the cycle, to counter hate with love, greed with generosity, vengeance with grace, doing things like giving away our cloaks and walking the extra mile to serve our enemies. Really?

Jesus' last antithesis is his most radical reinterpretation of the law. You've heard it said, "Love your neighbor (which was in the law) and hate your enemy (which wasn't in the law but is certainly implied...what else are you going to do with your enemies?)." This may seem a bit strange to us, because we don't really have enemies, do we? An enemy is someone who is actively opposed or hostile to us. We're a bit too sophisticated for that, aren't we? Having an enemy sounds a bit barbaric. And yet...there are those among us with whom we vehemently disagree, those who make decisions that harm others, those who stand in the way of justice and equality and freedom. They may not be our enemies, but they are actively opposed to God's work in our world.

Jesus says to love those people and pray for those who persecute you. To what end? "So that you might be children of your Father in heaven." God doesn't distinguish between our friends and our enemies. God created all of them and loves all of them, and we are called to do the same. As one pastor said to me about dealing with a very difficult congregation, "I just love 'em all and let God sort them out."

Only it's not always that easy, is it? In our world it's normal to return love for love and hate for hate. But Jesus says if you only love those who love you, you're not better than the people you hate, because that's what they do! Instead, we are not only called to love them but to pray for them, and not something like, "God, please show my enemy how wrong they are, and feel free to have them trip on an uneven patch of sidewalk or lose their wallet to make your point."

Jesus isn't asking us to love our enemies like we love our families and friends. Jesus isn't asking us to like our enemies, because that would sometimes be impossible. Liking someone is based on sentiment and emotion; loving them is based on seeing them as a child of God. And you can't pray for someone if you don't love them. But you can pray for them if you see them as a flawed human being, just like you.

There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. Praying for someone acknowledges our common humanity, even when so many other things divide us. Loving our enemies also carries with it the hope that our enemies can be transformed. Martin Luther King wrote, "If you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption." Hate can only destroy; love has the power to create, to redeem, to transform.

Jesus ends this section with the most absurd of all the statements he's made so far: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Really, Jesus? You do remember who you're talking to, right? My shoe has come untied twice today and I can't find my car keys, and yet you want me to be perfect? Matthew's choice of verbs here could actually be translated, "You shall be perfect," indicated a future tense that serves to call us forward toward a goal. The problem is the goal is unattainable for us.

Or is it? It depends on how you understand the word "perfect." Let's make an analogy. I have a screw loose...in my house. So what do I do? I go to the garage and get a screwdriver. This screwdriver has a good grip on the handle and fits nicely into my hand. It matches up with the screw exactly and when I turn the screwdriver, the screw is put back into place with precision and ease. I didn't grab the hammer or the chainsaw. They weren't suited for the job. But the screwdriver was perfect for it.

I don't think Jesus means "perfect" as in "without fault or blemish"; I think he means it as in "live out your purpose to the fullest. Be exactly who God created you to be. Fulfill your potential as a child of God." In other words, as we strive to go to the extreme with our generosity and show mercy and pray for those who hate us, we are loving like God loves, which is the perfect kind of love. The Message says it this way: "In a word, what I'm saying is, *Grow up*. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

One writer said this last command from Jesus is a realistically ideal goal that we are to pursue with restful dissatisfaction. We should be restful in our confidence that God loves us and that Jesus has died for us, but we should be dissatisfied in the ways in which that love is being shown in the world, to the point where we commit to live it out each and every day, even with those who insult us and hate us. Jesus is not saying we should condone evil or appease bullies. But we must not usurp God's exclusive right to justice. Our responsibility is to fulfill our God-given purpose, which is to show what God's love looks like, not what God's vengeance looks like. We are to strive for perfection in how we love everyone, even and especially the most unloveable. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Grow up. Be perfect. Really, Jesus? Really? Yeah, really.