

February 19, 2017 Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 5: 38-42

Remember the old saying: ***Familiarity breeds contempt.*** Well, I think that it summarizes our experience of this gospel passage. These core teachings of **Jesus** are so familiar that we can get lulled into indifference. In fact they are so familiar, so ordinary, that we refuse to take them seriously anymore. We seem to dismiss them out of hand. “Ya, ya, ya.”

However, **Mahatma Gandhi** reported that he was awe struck when he first read the Sermon on the Mount.

***“My heart stopped when I read Matthew chapter 5 through 7. And I woke up the next morning determined to turn these principles into practice.”***

They asked Gandhi, ***“What’s the difference between you and most Christians.”***

And Gandhi said quietly, ***“Well, I think he (Jesus) meant it.”***

The challenge for us is to understand all over again that when **Jesus** said, ***“Resist not the evil-doer.”***

He meant it.

When he said, ***“turn the other cheek.”***

He meant it.

When he said, ***“go also the second mile.”***

He meant it.

When he said, ***“give the shirt off your back.”***

He meant it.

When he said, ***“ give to anyone who begs from you.”***

He meant it

When he said, ***“do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”***

He meant it.

We’ve all heard these teachings from our Sunday school days. We have heard them when we were caught fighting in the schoolyard or bickering with siblings. It is

not supposed to be *“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”*. It is supposed to be *“turn the other cheek”*. Right?! Well that’s another thing about familiarity, we often summarize, edit or compress a teaching and it gets distorted in the process.

We only remember **Jesus** saying, *“You have heard it said ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say ‘turn the other cheek.’”* Right?! Well that it not exactly what he said.

**Jesus** says quite clearly, *“You have heard it said ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say ‘Resist not the evil-doer.’”* That is way bigger than simply turning the other cheek.

Whatever way we hear **Jesus**, what we think in our head is something else again, because we don’t really think he meant it. We think *“Yeah, but, I have the right to defend myself.”* Or *“Yeah, but, there are exceptions.”* (And we are always an exception.) We totally forget about the giving the shirt off our back, alms for the beggar and lending to anyone who asks.

Now we are not the only ones who resist this initial statement or misunderstand its meaning. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many scholars have interpreted *“Resist not the evil-doer,”* as **Jesus** calling for **persistent non-violent resistance**. The problem with this interpretation is that we are still resisting. We may not be as violent as the other person but resistance is still an act against something or someone. We are all familiar with passive aggressive behavior. We all know how powerful it can be and how manipulated it makes us feel.

**Jesus** says, *“Don’t resist the evil-doer.”* No passive aggressive behavior here. No *persistent non-violent resistance* allowed.

As long as we are resisting, we are playing their game and we are caught up in their worldview of violent and force as normative. And so, we are no farther ahead. I know I have spent most of my life struggling with which worldview to follow. **Gandhi** simply realized that *“An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”* And lived

another way. Learning from **Jesus** his persistent non-violent engagement centred on symbolic acts that exposed the unacceptable exploitative practices of the British Empire.

**You see, Jesus'** examples break the pattern of action/reaction; the pattern of aggression and resistance. **Jesus** breaks the pattern by acting in a way that exposes the person's or the system's greed or violence and offers a change of behaviour. We are called to offer an act of grace, an act that **restores** a person to their better self or restores the situation to a better outcome.

So, we are called to live **restoratively**.

Vicki and I have a post-it on our laptop desk which says, "***What miracle can I be that will change this situation.***" We are called to **be the miracle** that someone needs to clean up their act or get on the right track, or make the best decision.

In other words live *restoratively* as if **Jesus** really meant it – because he did!!

*Application for Today:*

Be the miracle that others need today.

## **Matthew 5: 43-48**

When we were kids growing up our maternal grandfather use to recite to us “***I am practically perfect in every way.***” And we believed him. His work benches were orderly and labeled; a place for everything and everything in its place. This was long before man caves but let me tell you his basement floor shone, you could eat off it. His two car garage was always clean and tidy. Early in life I realized that ***I wasn't practically perfect in any way.*** How many are with me here?

However as I got older I discovered that perfection could involve more than order and tidiness and pride. In fact the usual concepts of perfection were really messed up. This is what I mean.

The classical concept of perfection coming from the Greeks is teleological in nature, getting everything right, right up to the end, 100%, the perfect game. The apostle Paul recognized this as he wrote “***all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory.***”

However Matthew records **Jesus** urging us to “***be perfect as our eternal parent is perfect.***” Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount says “***be compassionate as your eternal parent is compassionate.***” Taking Matthew and Luke's versions together I would suggest that ***compassion is perfection in the moment.***

In our relational world, the present moment is what counts. Doing just the right thing at the right time is what perfection and compassion are all about.

Remember the feeling when someone showed up at just the right time and shared just the right words.

Remember being there for someone and offering what only you could offer.

Remember being with the right people at the right time in the right way and it was glorious.

Living this way more and more often is what following **Jesus** is all about.

***Compassion is perfection in the moment*** or as I stated in the earlier application for today: **being the miracle that others need today.**

**Jesus** reminds his listener about the real nature of divine perfection, or divine compassion, namely uncontrolling love. “*For God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*”

Uncontrolling love is the love that can love our enemies. **Jesus** expects us to express the same uncontrolling love, just as he did. It is *compassion, perfection* in the moment, giving our *best*.

**God** gives **God's** best:

the sun to shine,  
the rain to refresh,  
the soil to supply nourishment.

**God** gives unstintingly,  
always and everywhere,  
generosity without end.

As we participate in **God's** grace  
we become full, complete and mature  
in caring for the world  
and one another.

### **Application for today**

As followers of **Jesus** we give our best.

We live generously and graciously  
toward others  
the way **God** lives  
toward us.