

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany  
February 20, 2011  
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*Scriptures: Isaiah 49:8-16a, Psalm 131, 1Corinthians 4:1-5, Matthew 5:38-48*

So we continue reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew and things continue to get difficult. We heard about the beatitudes looked away from the idea that we need to be hungry or poor or persecuted in order to be blessed. We heard about doing more than what the commandments asked from us and we cringed at that reading because we realized it is just impossible to do. We heard Jesus praising the law of God and reminding us that our righteousness has to be even greater than we ever imagine. It does seem like the bar is constantly being raised. And today, the gospel reading just goes overboard in what it demands from us. Turn the other cheek, don't retaliate, love your enemies, pray for those who attack you. Sounds difficult enough? It shouldn't come as a surprise. In our heart, we know that's what's expected of us. But in our heart of hearts we just know that it's just too difficult to follow through with any kind of life-long consistency. Still, if you think all that is a little too much to ask, what should we do then with that last verse? The real kicker comes in when we hear: "Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect."

Isn't life difficult enough as it is? The time in which we live is so very scary. In reality it's probably not any more complicated than what others have had to live through, but because it is our life situation, it just looks daunting to us. We are anxious about the economy. We are nervous about seemingly never ending wars. So many other things look so very threatening and so we wonder about our future. In the middle of all this worldly situation, we look for solace and compassion. And yet, we may question if indeed there is relief in Jesus words today. The whole business about not retaliating and loving those who hurt you appears not to give us relief but to intensify the pressure. What are we to do?

Maybe we need to look at it from a different angle. What if we were to look at these supposedly impossible requirements of the gospel as a way to get rid of our stresses and anxieties? What if instead of thinking that more is expected from us to do, we were to think that we are just being asked to leave some of our burdens behind? One of those stories that abound over the internet tells about a teacher who asked their students to put in a backpack a stone for every wrong doing they felt was done to them. These would include when they were angry at someone, when they felt like not talking to someone else, and when they didn't want to forgive a person who hurt them. And then they were supposed to carry those backpacks wherever they went. They had to carry them in the bus, took them to the mall, when they were going out for a walk, and at the end of the day put them by their beds ready to take on again in the morning. Some of those backpacks got very heavy after a while. It didn't take long for the students to realize that it was better to get rid of the extra weight instead of taking it everywhere and thus a lesson was taught.

Maybe Jesus is not asking us to do more. Although, it is true, as we have emphasized during the last few weeks, that the demands of the gospel are indeed difficult to carry out. That does not negate however that following what Jesus teaches to us might just be a way of making our burden lighter not heavier. How so? Forgiveness, which is at the core of what Jesus is talking about. Often enough we think of forgiveness as a gift we make to someone else. And indeed that is the case in many situations. But we must not fail to understand that in a very important way forgiveness is also a relief for us. What happens when we get angry at someone? First, we tend to assume, out of our own human nature, that we are right. It must be so; otherwise we would not get angry. In fact our anger stems out of our belief that because I'm right, I'm the offended one. And because I'm offended and I'm angry I also want to get back at the person. One of the most pervasive and ancient of human emotions is that one of taking revenge. Why should I not do so, if after all I'm right? An injustice has occurred and it cannot remain just like that.

That, right there, is a heavy burden in and of itself. We want to get back. Return the same offense. Take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. So when Jesus says there is a different way to do things, what Jesus is saying, among other things, is to get rid of our own burden. Doesn't that emotion of revenge heavy our hearts with resentment and frustration? What if we were to let go of that? Wouldn't that allow us to live in a more happy way? You see, if we were to approach the words of Jesus as a way of getting rid of that which hurts and saddens our lives, then it may not look like something so very difficult to do. Responding to evil with good does not mean that we are letting others get away with murder. It means that we are healing. We are promoting health for both the other one and ourselves. The alternative is destructive. "An eye for eye leaves the world blind" Gandhi used to say. The fact of the matter is that it makes our lives easier, not more difficult, when we are able to forgive, to let go. In fact, it's not really adding pressure, it's relieving pressure. When I don't have the desire to retaliate I can have a more peaceful life.

What about becoming perfect as God our father is perfect? That does sound like a completely different game. When we hear "be perfect" we think of something that we cannot achieve. But again, Jesus is not setting a standard for us that is impossible to duplicate. What Jesus is calling us is to live in the way that we were intended to. The meaning of what Jesus says is better understood as a goal, an end, a purpose. In the beginning, humans were created to live in harmony with the rest of the elements of creation, including our neighbor. We are not talking about moral perfection, we are talking about intended perfection. But the desire to exact revenge or getting back when we feel hurt by others keeps us from realizing that original purpose. We can only repay evil with good, we can only pray for those that harm us, we can only forgive to the extent that live out the identity that God gave us. Beloved and blessed children of God. Because you can only love when you know yourself to be loved and that's what God intended for us in the beginning.

So what if we were to try that? What if we were to live in the way that God intended us to live? Am I saying that it would not be difficult? No, I'm not saying that. But I am saying that life would be so much better to live. We would not be carrying as much weight in our backpacks. We would be able to live more freely than we ever have. We would be

able to let go of our hurt and our pain. We would be able to love in the way that God has loved us. Is not a matter of making it easy, it's a matter of making it possible. To love rather than to hate; it's just a better way to live. Amen.