

## The Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

February 19, 2016

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18

Psalm 119:33-40

1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

This morning we continue with Jesus teaching on the mountain and it is as if we are given a chance to ease drop on his conversation with his disciples as he explains to them what it means to be his follower. This dialogue known as the Sermon on the Mount began with the Beatitudes and last week we heard Jesus say, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven". You can only imagine the thoughts of those hearing him – probably thinking that these are holy men and I'm supposed to do better than that?

And today Jesus gets more specific and detailed about what it means to be his follower. What about that turn the other cheek idea or give the beggar more than they that of which they ask or always go the extra mile. Once again Jesus is telling us that if we are to be his followers a lot will be asked of us.

And not only will a lot be asked of us, much of what is asked goes against our human nature. Biologically we have an inherent 'fight or flight' reflex – it is our body's primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to "fight" or "flee" from perceived attack, harm or threat to our survival. But yet Jesus is telling us to turn the other cheek – to which most of us ask – Are you crazy? Are you saying I'm just supposed to stand there and let someone hit me again?

It is important for us to remember the context of this sermon. The Law said: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" which was more equitable than killing an adversary in retaliation for an insult. Jesus again goes deeper into the Law, and unites our thoughts and our actions. Think for minute about the Hatfield's and the McCoy's, a family feud that began in 1863 and continued into the 20th century. I willing to bet that there were family members that had no idea what originally caused the fight but they continued it just because... It is also recorded that some members of the families intermarried and changed loyalties. It makes you wonder what was more important – the original issue or the act of fighting? Hostility can only be stopped when someone does not repay injury with more injury to continue the cycle of violence. If someone slaps your face and you slap her face and she slaps.... well, it can go on for generations. Or, one can quit, and the feud can die out. Think about boxers, when they hug each other, they can't hit each other and the ref breaks them up so they will start hitting each other. What a difference it would make if we would hug rather than hit both literally and figuratively. I think this is what Jesus is telling us – if we can just pause for a moment, perhaps we will realize that being hit once isn't the end of the world.

I feel that many people who hear this passage believe Jesus is telling us to just stand there and get beat up. I don't believe that's the case – he does teach and live a life of nonviolence but when he was struck, he did not literally turn the other cheek; but, as we read in the Fourth Gospel, he said to those striking him, "If what I said was

wrong, tell me. If I was right, why do you hit me?" Jesus was challenging his aggressors to change their ways.

In a speech about nonviolence by Dr. King he stated, "*We had to make it clear that nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice. It does resist. It is not a method of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence. This method is non-aggressive physically but strongly aggressive spiritually*". And then went on to say, "*Another thing that we had to get over was the fact that the nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding... The aftermath of non-violence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation. The end is redemption.*"<sup>1</sup>

What Jesus is calling us to be is to grow in love. That is what our Heavenly Father is – perfect in love. But loving those who don't like us, loving those who hate us is probably the hardest thing we are called to do. But consider our options – hate does nothing positive; it has a huge negative effect on our being and does nothing to build relationships. Loving our enemies most likely has a greater effect on our own self being that perhaps it does on our enemy. It prevents us from becoming like them, that person or group of people we don't care for and it preserves our self worth, our dignity.

We are promised that we will not be abandoned, that we will never be alone, that while not physically present in the form of the human, Jesus of Nazareth, He is with us in Advocate – the Holy Spirit – today and always. And we are promised eternal life!

Loving our neighbor is what we're called to do when we are told to be perfect like our Heavenly Father. Loving is what building the Kingdom is all about. Loving all without regard to faith tradition, to nationality, to skin color, to heritage – just simply loving because we are all children of God, we are all sisters and brothers of the one Creator, the one who is pure love.

To borrow the words of John Lennon –  
*Imagine all the people living life in peace, you  
You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
and the world will be as one*

So I ask myself these questions, I ask you these questions -- what could our world be if we started to love like this? What would the world be like if we, right here in the present, were to be more concerned with how we love others rather than how others love us? And wonder if others saw us doing this and they decided to live like this in their community?

Imagine...

1. Given at the University of California at Berkeley on June 4, 1957