

Jesus Redefines the Law of Moses:
From Saving Face to Modeling Divine Grace
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
February 20, 2011

Text: Matthew 5:38-48

NRSV

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also: ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The Sermon

Having four-year-old grandsons, the periodic telephone reports from New Jersey regarding what "the boys" are up to these days, coupled with my weekly interactions with the preschoolers enrolled in the church's Glory Be Early Learning Center, remind me how tough it is to be a kid. Growing up is not easy, even in the best of homes, or when enrolled in the most loving and responsible pre-schools.

Growing up is not easy when you are young and vulnerable to all sorts of things outside your control.

But growing old is not easy either, as many of you can attest. When I'm around the little ones I see and hear the little guys pretending to be tougher than they really are by dressing in super-hero outfits, and girls escaping at least some of the nitty gritty of their young lives dressing up as – and pretending to be – princesses.

But it is not just the very young and vulnerable, or the very old and also vulnerable who seek escape from the realities of life as it is unfolding. My early years were lived in a pre-tv and pre hand-held electronics era, so my own escape tended to be through the world of books that introduced me to the fascinating worlds of other youth who clearly seemed to live more exciting lives than my own. Until my mother chased me out of the house to play, or to do some of the chores she had on the family "to do" list under my name, I could spend hours in an easy chair imagining what it would be like to be anyone or anything other than what I was.

But when I got out of my own little fantasy world, and paid attention to the adults in my family, my church, and so forth, I remember how much time our form of faith seemed to focus on heaven and its joys. So maybe it wasn't just children and senior adults who were having a tough time facing the day-to-day.

Such memories intrigue me, now that I'm headed toward the later years of life, and am called to help others seek to make some sense of the "tough stuff" of life. My intrigue is not meant to disparage the life I lived then, and that I live now, but to wonder why it was so much easier for us to focus on life in heaven with Jesus, than to focus on how here and now and real-world reality based Jesus seemed to be.

Jesus – at least the Jesus reflected in passages such as the Sermon on the Mount – was anything but an escapist. His teachings did not lead his listeners and his followers to flights of fancy as to how good it will be by and by when you are in heaven with God and the heavenly angels. Rather they reflected on how his and their "Father in Heaven" expected them to live with each other right here on earth.

Clearly Jesus was distinctive, but his distinctive nature was not always or maybe even usually demonstrated in miraculous ways. It stemmed from a personal charisma that attracted common folk – the type of folk who could see right through pretense; folk who didn't have the time, money, or inclination to be attracted to pomp and circumstance.

At the same time Jesus – in spite of humble roots – seemed to have a remarkable understanding of the Torah, the life blood of the ways his people, the Jewish people, sought to follow with the utmost care. In observing Jesus' apparent tendency to disregard a legalistic interpretation of the law, one might think he didn't hold the Law of Moses in that high a regard.

Quite the contrary. He held the law in sufficient regard to consistently be able to quote it verbatim, but rather than say "Never mind, you don't have to take the law all that seriously," Jesus would consistently up the ante as to what observing the law truly entailed.

Our text for today is a clear example of this pattern of embracing – but then enhancing the standards by which people of true faith were to live and move and have their being.

Take, for example, the first law under consideration in our text.

Today we might think of a provision permitting an offended party to seek reparation for damages by literally taking "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" as being cruel and primitive or barbaric. Scholars of antiquity tell us, however, that this was actually quite an advance in the system of justice which previously justified total revenge.

The prior standard held that if someone offended you? Kill them. If someone took one of your sheep or your goats, steal their entire herd.

And so forth.

So, by limiting revenge to something equaling the original offense was quite an advance in social justice and interpersonal relationships.

However, even if it was Moses declaring that he had received the law code directly from God, Jesus had a remarkable capacity to perceive that his Abba expected more of those who professed to follow him.

Thus, Jesus did not content himself with simply quoting the scriptural law, he almost always added a social dimension to his interpretations.

Sometimes Jesus' perspectives are considered to be naive, or unrealistic in "real world" terms. But, are they? Can real men, and real women seek to follow the law of God as portrayed by God's Anointed One and take justice to a new level?

Biblical commentator and dynamic preacher Leonard Sweet has this to say about what Jesus is doing in this text:¹

... Jesus' message to the people was to stare the law in the face.

When "slapped" with the ultimate in a degrading insult, a backhand across the face, Jesus doesn't completely "opt out" of the "honor game" by telling us to slink away. But he also does not advocate striking a blow back.

Instead, Jesus says look your accuser, your attacker, right in the face. When slapped in the face, don't about face or save face or face off. Go "face to face." Outface your attacker with a third alternative. Outface your opponent in a way that goes beyond the legal and cultural concerns of social "honor." Outface your attacker in a way that forces a human face onto the laws we live by.

Do you hear it? Jesus isn't asking us to "lose face." Jesus isn't looking for a way we can "save face." Jesus isn't advocating we "face off" in battle or "about face" and run in retreat.

No, Jesus asks us to look our "neighbor" in the face and outface our enemies with God's perfect law of love.

Few among us seem to be capable of – or called to – lives that truly model the courage it takes to be meek and humble. Being confronted with such examples can, however, be life-changing.

¹ "Your Honor: Jesus' Honor Code of Turning the Other Cheek," a sermon on Matthew 5:38-48 by Leonard Sweet as reproduced in Sermons.com.

When I was at Whitworth, one of our undergraduate female resident assistants had the opportunity to go on a summer mission assignment through a program called Diakonia. It was a program where students had the opportunity for hands-on ministry in settings very unlike the ones in which they grew up.

Beth's assignment was to a mission outpost in New York City staffed by nuns associated with Mother Teresa of Calcutta's mission. She lived with the resident nuns in a the dormitory part of a building where at the street level they operated a soup kitchen.

Beth reported that one day so many people were in need of the food provided by the program that they literally went through everything in the soup kitchen pantry and, when the last patron left, they locked the door and retreated to their private quarters thoroughly exhausted.

But then came a loud knock on the door which they couldn't simply ignore, and Beth accompanied the sister who answered the door. It was a male, who apologized profusely for bothering them after hours, but indicating that he and his family were totally out of food so could they help.

Beth acknowledged that her response would have been "No way!. We have gone through all the soup kitchen resources"

Instead, this particular nun who had become an especially close friend and role model for Beth said "Certainly, wait here a minute and I'll be back with some food."

To Beth's surprise and horror, this nun went to the monastic order's food pantry and took and gave to the man what was intended for the sisters' supper.

After the man had left, Beth said she blurted out, "How could you do that? That was to be our supper!"

She reported that the sister calmly replied, "How could I not? Scripture informs us that we see the face of Christ in someone such as this man. Would you want Jesus to go hungry?"

Beth went to her room and cried.

Later in the summer, this nun who was her close friend received orders to return to the mother house in Calcutta, with a scheduled departure date just a day or two away.

In her grief at the loss of her ability to finish out the summer in the company of this dear friend, Beth blurted out (she said she did a lot of blurting that summer), "How can you do that? How can anyone get ready to go from New York to Calcutta so quickly?"

To which, she reported her friend calmly replied, "Beth, my only personal possessions are a bucket and an extra sari. How long do you think I need to pack?"

Not all can live as these sisters lived.

But it isn't just nuns who seem to have the distinctive gift of understanding what the radical love of God, as modeled by Jesus the Christ, truly means.

In her book Clothed with the Sun,² Joyce Hollyday shares the remarkable story of faith and divine love for enemies exhibited by a woman named Sarah Corson. Hollyday writes:

“One of the most dramatic examples comes from a remote village in a South American jungle. Sarah Corson, a founder of Servant in faith and Technology (SIFAT) in Alabama, was on a mission to set up an agricultural project in a village where she and her husband had earlier started a church and built a fish hatchery. She was with seventeen young people, including two of her sons. One Thursday night, around midnight, thirty soldiers rushed toward the house where they were all staying. Sarah was paralyzed with shock as the soldiers stormed over the clearing leading to the house. She remembered with fear that earlier that day, a neighbor had overheard a conversation near the military camp in which soldiers had blamed Americans for recent resistance to a military takeover of the country. The soldiers had vowed to exterminate all Americans in the region.

Sarah Corson prepared to die. But as the soldiers approached, she found herself offering them warm words of welcome. The commander shoved his rifle against her stomach and pushed her into the house. The soldiers began pulling everything off the shelves and out of drawers. Sarah calmly explained that she and the others were there only to set up projects and teach the Bible. The commander, stating that he had never read the Bible, said, ‘Maybe it is a communist book, for all I know.’ Sarah asked him to let her talk about it.

While he kept his gun pointed at her and the other soldiers continued ransacking the house, Sarah opened a Spanish Bible the Sermon on the Mount. She read about Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies.

‘That’s humanly impossible!’ the commander shouted.

‘That’s true, sir,’ she answered. ‘It isn’t humanly possible, but with God’s help it is possible.’ She challenged him to let her prove it by killing her slowly: ‘Cut me to pieces little by little, and you will see you cannot make me hate you. I will die praying for you because God loves you.’

The commander lowered his gun and stepped back. Then he ordered everyone in the house to march to a truck. But before they reached the truck, he turned around and led the women back to the house. He told Sarah that the women would be raped repeatedly in the jungle camp, so he could not take them there. He also told her that this was the first time he had disobeyed an order from a superior officer—and that he would pay with his life if he were found out. He said as he left, ‘I could have fought any amount of guns you might have had, but there is something here I cannot understand. I cannot fight it.’

² Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and US* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 111-13.

The village waited in agony for word of the men who had been taken. The local people insisted that the church service not be held on Sunday, because soldiers considered any gathering a source of political agitation. But on Saturday night, a messenger arrived with word from the commander of the attack that he would be in church on Sunday. He wanted Sarah to come and get him; if she did not, he would walk the ten miles. It sounded to Sarah like a threat. She sent a message throughout the town that night. 'We will have the service after all,' she said, 'but you are not obligated to come. In fact you may lose your life by coming. No one knows what this soldier will do. Do not come when the church bell rings unless you are sure God wants you to come.'

Sarah picked up the commander and his bodyguard at the military camp. Holding their rifles they marched coldly into the church and sat down. The church was packed before the first hymn was over. The people came in fear and trembling, but they came.

It was the church custom to welcome visitors by inviting them to the platform, singing a welcome song, and waving to them. Then the congregation would line up to shake the visitors' hands, embrace them, and offer a personal greeting. Sarah decided only to offer the commander and his bodyguard the song. Stunned to be invited up front, the two soldiers stood with their guns across their backs. The people sang weakly and waved timidly. But then, the first man on the front seat came forward and put out his hand. As he bent over to hug the soldiers, Sarah overheard him saying, 'Brother, we don't like what you did to our village, but this is the house of God, and God loves you, so you are welcome here.' Every person in the church followed his example, even the women whose eyes were red from weeping for their loved ones whom the commander had taken prisoner.

The commander was incredulous. He marched to the pulpit and said, 'Never have I dreamed that I could raid a town, come back, and have that town welcome me as a brother.' Pointing to Sarah, he said, 'That sister told me Thursday night that Christians love their enemies, but I did not believe her then. You have proven it to me this morning. . . I never believed there was a God before, but what I have just felt is so strong that I will never doubt the existence of God as long as I live.'

The commander stayed for lunch with the congregation and offered money from his own pocket to parishioners who had loved ones taken away. Two weeks later, all of the men who had been taken were released from the basement cell where they had been imprisoned and some had been tortured.

Sarah Corson was overcome with gratitude to God for putting divine love in her heart for a person she could not love on her own. She remembers the last words the commander said to her: 'I have fought many battles and killed many people. It was nothing to me. It was just my job to exterminate them. But I never knew them personally. This is the first time I ever knew my enemy face to face. And I believe that if we knew each other, our guns would not be necessary.'"

Let those with ears to hear, hear this message of love and forgiveness in action.

Amen