

February 19, 2017

Choosing to Love My Enemies

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be mediations of our hearts and always be acceptable unto Thee.
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

SERMON

As I was preparing for the sermon this morning, a thought came to mind. And this is especially for those of you who think that sometimes my sermons may get a little long. I just would like to point out that this is the fourth Sunday that we've been hearing passages from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and there are still two chapters to go.

It's been an interesting journey, I think. At least it has been for me as a preacher. To go through the attitudes and the part about being salt and light, and last week about Jesus taking everything backwards a bit. You've heard, you were told that you shall not commit murder but I tell you to set that back much further. From the very beginnings of being angry and insulting. And in doing such things, trying to draw the people and to realize that they are being invited to something very special. Something that is about being citizens of God's kingdom. And as citizens of God's kingdom we have to reflect who God is. That the essence of God is love.

And therefore, that's part of who we are. To accept that love, to reflect that love to God and to the world. Last week, I talked about...(Phone rings) Now there's an idea for the sermon. Just remember that when the plate comes by. (Laughter) I knew I had a track here somewhere.

Last week I talked about making choices. We heard from the Old Testament, Moses was telling people as they were about to go to the promised land. You have to choose now. Choose life over death. Choose blessing over curse. And what Jesus was trying to do was build on that understanding. That we're called to watch and be aware of the choices we make early on. Because bad choices will lead us eventually to the murder, to stealing, to the things that we have already been told that God wants us to turn away from.

Now the reading this morning, has a slightly different approach. You've heard that it was said, love your neighbor. But hate your enemies. And Jesus says something radical. But I say to you, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." It also says something else at the end of the passage.

Last week I asked how many people felt uncomfortable with what Jesus had to say to the people and about how they are to act. And most of the people responded that it made them somewhat uncomfortable at the least. Well today we hear Jesus say, "Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Now I'm not going to ask for a show of hands. But you know who you are. How many of you feel perfect? Like your heavenly father is perfect. How many of you have asked what it is for God to be perfect? Have you ever thought about that? A lot of people

have. Through history, the biggest question that non-believers ask of Christians is that if God is all powerful, and God is all loving, and is all good. Why is there so much evil in the world? If there is a God, and God has created all things and God is perfect. Why is God's creation such a mess? Why do we have such evil, and hurt, and pain in the world?

I'm going to take it back to the Old Testament again. If you were listening carefully. Moses said something else to the people. He said, be holy because your heavenly father is holy. How many of you feel holy? How many of you feel as if you are reflecting the holiness of God in the world and God's creation? And yet even when the law is being given, this comes from Leviticus. It is Moses speaking on behalf of God. Be holy as God is holy, because your God is holy. You are a chosen people. You are called to reflect that. You are called to show God's holiness in the world so that the world might come and embrace the holiness of God. You are called to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect because you are to bring that perfection to bear in the world. This is the perfection of God.

I thought about that and even struggled with it a little bit. I finally decided that the perfection of God comes from the creation or is reflected in the creation. In the environment that God has created for us. The perfection is that in God's creation, there is abundance for everyone. There is the possibility for every person to be fed. There is the possibility for every person to have a home. There is the possibility, there is the abundance for every person to have the water that they need to sustain life. What prevents that from happening is not God's perfection or lack thereof but our inability to follow what God has called us to do and to be. To recognize the abundance and not to feel as though we need to hoard it. To surround ourselves by the abundance of resources that God has created. The perfect environment that God has created.

Rather than see to it that every person has what they need. Instead to many of us to make the decision to surround ourselves not only with what we need but to take away from others what they need. You are called to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect. And that means in making choices. Again, we get back to choices. We have to choose to be happy with the things that we have. We have to choose to see our enemies as human beings. And to make a choice to pray for them. Now maybe praying for their conversion and maybe praying for them to see that they are loved by God. And that they don't need all these things around them to separate them from the world. To separate them from people who are not like them.

To see that they are a part of God's perfect creation, environment. We are called to reflect God's love. We are called to offer forgiveness for those who have hurt us or frustrated us. Who don't live up to our expectations. Who don't come in the manner that we want them to come to be with us. We are called to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.

Last week I said no one starts out as a murderer. No one starts out stealing from others. It's a progression. It's a matter of small choices leading up to anger and frustration. Where acts of atrocity can actually take place. Where one feels like it's justified to steal from others. In the same way, I would suggest to you that being perfect, being holy is not an immediate thing. It's a matter of choices. Very small choices of which we make hundreds every day. Choices to care

and to love. Choices not to be angry. Choices to forgive. Choices to build relationship rather than allow relationships to be broken. It's about the small choices that we make every day about how we will be in the world.

Jesus said to the people gathered there, "Give to everyone who asks, let everyone borrow. If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other." These are not simple things. It requires a choice. A choice to move beyond that simple reaction of anger and frustration and hurt of withholding forgiveness. It takes a choice to try to draw from the other a different response. To bring God's love to bear on the situation. To show that we are not shackled by the resources that we have been blessed with. But recognize that we are free to share with others. We are called to holiness, we are called to perfection.

I'm trying to decide whether I want to share a very personal story with you or not. And I'm going to so sit back. I have a cousin who could not be more different from me. He's not a Christian. He is angry with the way America is. With the people he's had to deal with he feels all his life. And we were having a conversation via computer and he made the statement, I will never turn the other cheek, ever. And I said to him, I have to take seriously (and this was just a couple of weeks ago, so it was really something when this passage came up this Sunday) my Lord's call to turn the other cheek. To love my enemies, to pray for them. That's the only way things can change for the better. If we respond with the same action, it will only get escalate. It'll only get worse. You can't conquer evil with evil. You can only conquer evil with good. So as a priest and as a Christian I have to take that seriously. He wrote back and he said, well I'm not a priest and I'm not a Christian.

And I said that says so much about it. I understand more now. Some of things that you say and some of the things that you share and do. And I hurt for him. The only thing he has to hold onto is the sense of identity as an American and the way he sees America ought be. He doesn't see anything calling for him to be higher. To be better, to show love. And not because everybody else is showing love because everybody doesn't. But we are called to. Even in the face of enemies. Even in the face of violence. Do not resist those evildoers. We have such a great gift in the words of Jesus. He has shown us a better way. He has shown us a way that leads away from destruction. And into a better world. A world where the perfection of God and the environment that God has created can be lived out. And it takes struggle and it takes restraint. And it takes choices, hundreds of choices every day. If I make those choices and progress a step further towards perfection. If you do the same, then we are very slowly drawing God's creation to the perfect environment that God created.

It's a process, but it's a process that we have all committed ourselves to. In being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In making the promises that we made in our baptismal covenant. We have started that process. May we commit ourselves to that more and more.