

Against the Grain©

Matthew 5:43-48

February 19, 2017

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Mark Twain once said: *“It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”*

It's true, isn't it? There are some things in the Bible, particularly the things Jesus said, that we might think we would prefer to not understand it. Like last weeks not being angry with anyone. Letting anger go. Or turning the other cheek if someone hits you. Or giving them your coat if they steal from you.

What??? Surely Jesus doesn't mean that.

And now, the teaching continues in this week's lesson to love our enemies. Where does Jesus get this stuff? Seriously? Think about it. Who is your worst enemy? Do you have an enemy? Who do you consider an enemy? I think that's a good question, don't you?

Do you do like I tend to do when I think of enemies? I try to conjure up in my mind someone who just doesn't like me that much. There've been a few over the years. I worked with a woman in Jay, Oklahoma, who seemed determined to push my buttons.

I don't know why she didn't like me but she prodded and pushed until one day, the simplest little statement caused my lid to blow off. I lost it. I screamed at her for a good ten minutes, it seemed, while other coworkers sat in pure shock. I really don't lose my cool like that. But she pushed me over the edge.

I guess we all have that boiling point. At least I found out I did. And she made it even worse by then saying, “Now we see what you're really like.” She's lucky that I went and hid my face in the bathroom for an hour.

It seems like we are seeing enemies everywhere these days, as we watch the news and see protestors; we listen to the rhetoric from liberals and from conservatives. Our nation looks like we are at war with one another, in a way.

And with the acts and threats of terrorism, we now often look at our neighbors who are citizens like us but who look different, whose origin may have been from one of the countries where terrorists are from, whose religion may be different from ours, and we are becoming more afraid, more leery of who they are and what their intent really is in living here among us.

And then I think about enemies like the person who came into the school at Sandy Hook Elementary and shot and killed innocent children and teachers.

Or the man who walked into the church during bible study, sat with them through the study and then shot them.

We could go on and on naming those types of incidents with those kinds of enemies. Those would be the kinds of enemies I would have a hard time loving. And I think most of us would ask – surely Jesus doesn't mean to love an enemy, in a case like that? There is no way he could expect that. Is there?

Yet there seems to be no reason – no other interpretation for this. In fact, if you could through and read all of this sermon on the mount you come to realize that Jesus' teaching is – as we said last week – just plain weird.

That's not who we are today. Surely Jesus wouldn't say those things to us in this post-modern era. With terrorism, with political ridiculousness, with people slinging slander at us right and left. With social media bullying. With name calling. That probably didn't go on back in Jesus' day. It probably wasn't that hard to love your enemies then. Right?

Except. Then we realize that in Jesus' day, the Jews were under the oppression and the occupation of the Romans. And the Romans were ruthless often times. Or, when the gospels were written, the temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem was in ruins.

So, there really is no reason to think that Jesus' words to love enemies was meant for them but not for us. And we have to come to realize Jesus isn't using some metaphor here. He isn't speaking some secret code for something else that means. Nope. He really is telling us to love our enemies. So weird. He always goes against the grain. And he expects his disciples to do the same.

But why? Why can't we just act the same way everyone else acts? Why should we be different? Why shouldn't we get revenge when someone hurts us?

But, that's the thing here. We are disciples. If we have made those profession of faith vows that we witness every time we ordain someone or we baptize or welcome a new member, then we are a disciple. You can't really be a genuine Christian (a Christ follower) without being a disciple – one who follows.

I mean, you could be a disciple who's got her head in the sand, ducking from all the teachings Jesus' gives. You could just be a procrastinator, thinking that eventually you will begin to do what Jesus' says. But we really aren't true disciples until we have made the commitment to do what he says. We forget sometimes that the ultimate goal for us is what Jesus commanded as he was about to ascend to heaven after his resurrection.

Remember? He said to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In other words, the work of a disciple is to do the work of the teacher and to gain even more disciples – for their sakes and for the sake of the gospel spreading all over.

We are called to look like God's kingdom here on earth. We are commanded to be different so others will see how different God is. Our tendency is to be like everyone

else. But our calling as Jesus people is to go against the grain. To show a different way. A way of love. A way of peace. A way of welcome and hospitality. Of forgiveness.

The strongest witness of the early Christians came not when they struck back at those who persecuted them, but when they loved their enemies.

One powerful example: In times of plague, when the pagans deserted the cities leaving behind friends and family members who were sick, the Christians often stayed on, caring for Christians and pagans alike at great personal risk to themselves. -- Rev. M. Park Hunter, Onalaska UMC, Onalaska, Wisconsin.

So, not only do we have a whole bunch of difficult teachings from Jesus – teachings that seem almost impossible for us to do, but then he adds on that we have to be perfect. Perfect, like God is perfect! Okay, this has just gotten way past possible, right?

But if we look at the word in Greek that has been translated as perfect, we can see that it also has another translation. The root word is *telos* and it can be translated as “perfect” but other meanings that we might be more comfortable with are: “completion, intended goal, determined end.” In other words, Jesus is asking us to persist in the goal Jesus has for us.

What would the point be in being the Church – which is made up of Christ followers – or disciples – if we did not learn from the one we follow and if we did not persist in doing what he teaches us to do – to go against the grain. We are to be different. We are to persist in getting it right so others see that difference and understand that we are living according to a different standard. We are modeling the kingdom on earth until God’s final kingdom is established with the return of Christ.

Martin Luther King told this true story in a sermon he preached titled *Loving Your Enemies*. This is what he said:

You remember when Abraham Lincoln was running for president of the United States, there was a man who ran all around the country talking about Lincoln. He said a lot of bad things about Lincoln, a lot of unkind things. And sometimes he would get to the point that he would even talk about his looks, saying, "You don't want a tall, lanky, ignorant man like this as the president of the United States."

Finally, one day Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. ... And then came the time for him to choose a Secretary of War. He looked across the nation, and decided to choose a man by the name of Mr. Stanton.

And when Abraham Lincoln stood around his advisors and mentioned this fact, they said to him: "Mr. Lincoln, are you a fool? Do you know what Mr. Stanton has been saying about you? Did you read all of those derogatory statements that he made about you?"

Abraham Lincoln stood before the advisors around him and said: "Oh yes, I know about it; I read about it; I've heard him myself. But after looking over the country, I find that he is the best man for the job."

Mr. Stanton did become Secretary of War, and a few months later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. And if you go to Washington, you will discover that one of the greatest words or statements ever made about Abraham Lincoln was made by this man Stanton. ...

Stanton stood up and said: "Now he belongs to the ages." And he made a beautiful statement concerning the character and the stature of this man.

If Abraham Lincoln had hated Stanton, if Abraham Lincoln had answered everything Stanton said, Abraham Lincoln would have not transformed and redeemed Stanton.

Stanton would have gone to his grave hating Lincoln, and Lincoln would have gone to his grave hating Stanton. But through the power of love Abraham Lincoln was able to redeem Stanton.¹

When we, who are disciples of Jesus strive to love enemies, persist in going against the grain and show love and peace instead of hatred and revenge, we have the power to transform people and relationships. It's possible that God can take that small thing we obediently do and change lives and situations.

As we look at our nation that so desperately is in need of peace and unity, we might pray about what Jesus would tell us to do to help heal. As we bump into someone who has "done us wrong" and we decide to be kind and friendly, think about the surprise – the impact that could make on someone. The change in your relationship that could then trickle down into other relationships.

I do want to say this: There is a difference in loving, as God loves, and in working for justice. God loves us unconditionally. But God is also a God of justice. There can be no peace without justice for those who are in the margins.

I believe that if we are to be, as Jesus said, perfect like God, we must figure out how to love our enemies, but also work for justice for the powerless. Our voices of love can ring out as advocates for the poor, for the victims, for the hurting.

It's not easy. Jesus did not say it would be easy. But with his help, it is possible. He asks us all to try. To persist. To strive for excellence.

Because really, that's exactly what he has given us in the cross. Excellent mercy, forgiveness and hope; excellent salvation, transformation, redemption ... and eternal life.

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¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving your enemies," a sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, November 17, 1957. <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu>. Retrieved October 12, 2014.