

Scripture: *Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

* * * * *

Introduction

Our gospel reading this morning continues with verses from the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount has been the source of our gospel texts for the past several Sundays. Today's text is filled with a litany of exhortations from Jesus that are the exact opposite of what would seem natural and even reasonable for us human beings to do. As one author has put it, "Revenge is as natural to us as any human impulse. When we are hurt, we tend to want to hurt back. When we have been insulted or criticized, we tend to want to insult or criticize back. When attacked, we attack back."¹

Yet in this gospel text, we hear Jesus advising us to respond in a very different way: forgo revenge if you've been hurt; give more than is required in a lawsuit; go the extra mile; give to all who beg; lend without limits; love your enemy; and oh yes, besides all that, be perfect! Jesus is telling us **not** to do what most people do naturally when mistreated: namely, respond with anger and violence and revenge. So how are we to respond to these exhortations of Jesus? As we strive to follow these commands, we will quickly find that it's an impossible feat. So what are we to do?

"Deep Talk"

In West Africa there is a phrase called "**deep talk.**" If an older person is telling someone about a situation, he/she might use a parable or an axiom, and then add to the end of the story, "*Take that as deep talk.*" It means that you must continue to go down deeper and deeper . . . The answer always lies deeper and deeper . . . In a sense, Jesus words to us in today's gospel is "deep talk" – we must keep going down deeper and deeper.

It's Really about God

First, we need to understand that these words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount say more about what God is like than about what we are like. Jesus ends this particular passage with the call to *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* The "therefore" in that sentence directs us back to that litany of exhortations – they describe what God is like. They tell us about God's love, God's faithfulness. It is God who has repeatedly turned the other cheek; it is God who gives more than is required and goes the extra mile with us; it is God who loves those who see Him as an enemy, letting the sun rise and sending rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous; it is God who does not exact an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. It is this God who is perfect love and calls us to imitate that love. But how can we go about that?

Active Love in the Power of God

We need to begin by realizing that imitating God's love for us towards others is very *active*. Love is a verb – an active verb. Jesus is not so much concerned about how we *feel* toward those who hurt or injure us, but rather with *how* we act toward them. This passage from the sermon on the mount is silent on our feelings but very descriptive in terms of what "love" actually does: it walks the extra mile, turns the other cheek, and gives away one's cloak. It's as if Jesus is saying that our response as Christians to the *negative* acts of others must be a *positive act* in return. This is not about becoming resigned to the bad behavior of others. It's not about

¹Sullender, R. Scott, from *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (February, March 2011) 24.

being passive and becoming a doormat for someone else. Jesus is not advising his hearers to stay in abusive relationships. Instead Jesus is calling us to active love – to love as God has loved us. In the examples Jesus gives, it's clear he taught that the disciple is not to be passive when confronted by evil, but active. In recent history, we have seen the power of such response in the work of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. More recently we've seen it in the breakdown of a 30 year regime in Egypt, overthrown by the very active, but, for the most part, non-violent protests of Egypt's citizens.

But let's not limit this to the large-scale, national work of people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. What's the impact on each of us as individual Christian followers of Jesus?

True Story – A Hungry Enemy²

A family of relatively new Christians were reading the bible one night together when they ran across the verse, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him" (Romans 12:20 RSV).

The two sons, ages 7 and 10 at the time, were especially puzzled. "Why should you feed your enemy?" they wondered. The husband and wife wondered too, but the only answer they could think of to give the boys was, "We're supposed to because God says so." It never occurred to them that they would soon learn why.

Not too long thereafter, John, the ten-year-old son came home from school complaining about a classmate who sat behind him in 5th grade. "Bobby keeps jabbing me when Miss Smith isn't looking," he said. "One of these days, when we're out on the play ground, I'm going to jab him back."

John's mother was quite upset about Bobby jabbing her son. She was ready to go down to the school and jab Bobby herself. Obviously the boy was a brat. Besides, why wasn't Miss Smith doing a better job with her kids? She wanted to give her an oral jab, too, at the same time!"

John's mother was still fuming over this injustice to her son when John's 7 year old brother spoke up: "Maybe John should feed his enemy."

John and both his mom and dad were startled by this statement. None of them was sure about this "enemy" business. It didn't seem that an enemy would be in the 5th grade. An enemy was someone who was way off... well, somewhere else.

They all looked at John's dad. Since he was the father, he should come up with the solution. But the only answer he could offer was the same one he had given before: "I guess we should because God said so."

John's mom then asked John, "Well, do you know what Bobby likes to eat? If you're going to feed him, you may as well get something he likes."

"Jelly beans," John almost shouted, "Bobby just loves jelly beans."

So they bought a bag of jelly beans for John to take to school the next day, and decided that the next time Bobby jabbed John, John was simply to turn around and deposit the bag on his "enemy's" desk. Then they would see what might happen.

The next afternoon, the boys rushed home from the school bus and John called ahead, "It worked, Mom! It worked." Needless to say, Mom wanted the details: "What did Bobby do? What did he say?"

"He was so surprised," replied John, "he didn't say anything – he just took the jelly beans. But he didn't jab me the rest of the day!"

In time, John and Bobby became the best of friends – all because of a little bag of Jelly Beans.

²As presented on SermonCentral.com. A woman wrote to "Pulpit Helps" to explain a miraculous lesson her family experienced. SOURCE: Pulpit Helps).

Conclusion

Jesus is challenging his listeners and us to find creative and active ways to respond to hurt, insult, or criticism rather than responding as in a retaliatory way. Is this impossible? If we rely on our own strength, then yes, it is impossible. But given the power, truth, and faithfulness of God, to whom all things are possible, NO - it's not impossible. Sometimes all it takes is a bag of jelly beans. **Take this as "Deep talk."**