

Love Your Enemies  
Matthew 5:38-48  
April 30, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

We have been studying the Gospel of Matthew this spring. Matthew is the longest gospel by far. I try to go through the scripture in order, but of course, Easter comes when it comes, and this year Easter was early, so we have a little time between now and Pentecost to circle back and pick up some of the scriptures we skipped over. Today's text is from the Sermon on the Mount, very early in Jesus' ministry. It is from a set of passages in which Jesus extends the requirements of the Torah, the Law. They all begin "You have heard it said...but I say to you."

Today's passage is all about how to live under the oppression of Roman rulers. There was a big argument back then about whether armed resistance was the way to go. But Jesus begins with three examples in which he commands us to avoid this.

Suppose someone strikes you on the right cheek. This would be a person with power over you, backhanding you with his right hand. Jesus says, offer your left cheek to be slapped as well. Your choice not to fight back, but also your choice not to bow down, is a form of non-violent resistance. The oppressor doesn't get to define the situation. You do.

The second example is about coats and cloaks. Most people owned one of each, and not much else in the way of clothing. The coat was worn closest to the skin, and the cloak over that. There were certain legal situations where a person's coat could be taken in repayment of a debt. But the law said that you couldn't sue for both the coat and the cloak. Jesus says, if someone sues you for your coat, your inner garment, give them your cloak as well. Here, Jesus is saying we should avoid not only physical violence but also legal recourse in responding to an oppressor. It is your choice how you will respond to the suit. The oppressor doesn't get to define the situation. You do.

The third example is about military conscription. The law said that the occupying Roman army could force people to carry their gear for them, but only for one mile. Then they had to find someone else to carry it for the next mile. But the limit was frequently ignored. If you choose to go that second mile, voluntarily, without coercion, you rob the oppressor of the ability to coerce you. The oppressor doesn't get to define the situation. You do.

In the second half of this passage, Jesus gives probably the hardest charge here for us to obey. "Love your enemies," he says, "And pray for those who persecute you." Love your enemies. Pray for them.

I don't know about you, but I don't like any of these commandments. If someone hits me, I'm probably going to call the police. I don't want to walk around in just my underwear because I gave up all my clothes. I don't want to carry some soldier's 50-pound pack for one mile, let alone two. And if someone does all those things to me, I think I might find it in my heart not to hate them...maybe...but I don't know that I could ever love them. I think this is a really challenging passage.

And it is especially challenging for me because it has been used by the church to justify sending victims of domestic abuse back to suffer more abuse. "Turn the other cheek," pastors have advised. I don't like what this passage expects of me, and I detest the way it has been used to revictimize vulnerable people.

And then I remember the power of the Civil Rights Movement. Brave demonstrators simply sat at segregated lunch counters and asked to be served, and then they did not resist being beaten and taken to jail. Others marched toward Montgomery, Alabama to demand the right to vote, and they were met on the Edmund Pettus Bridge with fire hoses and dogs and clubs. They did not resist. The non-violence of the protestors – on city busses, at lunch counters, marching, trying to register to vote – their non-violence, even sometimes at the cost of their own lives, was there for the whole world to see, and it stood in stark contrast to the violent racism that they were opposing. There could be no doubt about who the oppressors were and who was being oppressed. Non-violent action eventually won the day.

And I also remember the terrible shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015, when Dylann Roof, who was white, shot and killed the church's pastor and eight other members, who were meeting for prayer. They had invited Roof to join them, and he did pray with them. He told investigators later that he almost didn't go through with the shooting because the people were so nice to him. But in the end, he opened fire, because he wanted to start a race war. It was a terrible wound to that congregation and to the city, and a horrible desecration of that historic church. And I remember watching the bond hearing just two days later, when families of Roof's victims said, in tears, "You killed my mothers. I miss her so much. You have hurt me more than you can possibly imagine. You have hurt me. But I forgive you. I forgive you, and I will pray for your soul."

Notice that their forgiveness did not keep Roof from standing trial. He had to experience the consequences of his actions. But because they were able to forgive him, they took away his power to dominate their lives, their spirits. He did not get to define the situation for them. They did.

I doubt that I could have done what they did, especially just two days after such a devastating loss. But the family members said it was what Pastor Pinkney had taught them, and he would not want his own death to be the occasion for them to turn away from Christ's teaching. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Jesus ends this passage by saying, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." So, let me state the obvious. We are not perfect. God knows we are not perfect. We are human, the way God made us. But we are also children of God, and people should be able to at least see a family resemblance between us and our heavenly Father. We should resemble God in ways that people can recognize.

Margee is fond of reminding the Bible Study group that God is Love. Just love. Always love. And our job is to get out of the way and let that love flow through us every day. Some days it is easier than others. So, when we find ourselves responding in a human way to oppression, perhaps we can stop for just a moment and open our hearts to let God's own love flow through us. When someone takes more than we have to give, we can let Love show us the way to respond. When the burden we are carrying for someone else is too great, Love can flow through us to lighten the load. And when someone has sworn to be our enemy, even to kill us, we can rob him of his power by showing him God's love in return.

May the light that shines through us be always the light of God's own love for everyone we meet.

Amen