

Turning the Other Cheek: Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The church has spent a lot of time taking about what Jesus did - his baptism, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection - but not so much on what Jesus said. Our readings for today suggest why this might be true. What Jesus says is both consistent with what we dismiss as the legalisms of the Hebrew Testament, and far too hard for us. We hear Jesus' words as setting an impossible standard.

But today we cannot escape Jesus' words. In the First Reading we have a summary of the heart of the commandments of Hebrew Scripture, and in the Gospel we have a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. If there is to be any action, it is up to us.

Our passage from Leviticus is a recapitulation of the behavioral norms and cultic practices that were to guide the life of the Children of Israel. It begins with startling words: *"Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy."* Are we really expected to be holy like God is holy?

Our Leviticus reading omits the commandments about respect for parents, keeping the Sabbath, worshiping idols and the manner of presenting sacrifices. It picks up with a commandment about harvesting grains and fruit: do not pick it all; leave some for the poor you know and the aliens you do not know. Next comes a prohibition against stealing, (making it clear that the poor or the aliens going onto to someone's property to harvest what was left is not theft.) Then come prohibitions against fraud, swearing by God's name, exploiting others, withholding wages, impatience with those who cannot speak, putting stumbling blocks in the way of the blind, being unjust in the administration of justice, slandering your family, jeopardizing the safety of your neighbor, extracting vengeance, or bearing a grudge. The Leviticus reading ends with the mandate *"You will love your neighbor as yourself. I am Yahweh. You will keep my laws."* An emphatic call to a life of holy living in everything one does.

What about our Gospel reading? Surely, Jesus loosens things up a bit.

As you have no doubt heard, Diane and I recently returned from Israel/Palestine. While meeting with Bishop Dawani, the Episcopal Bishop of Jerusalem and Jordan, we gave him the very generous gift from members of Christ Church for the Bishop's work in his Diocese. Most of our time on the trip was spent visiting the sites where tradition says the events of Jesus' life took place. If one has any inclinations toward skepticism, one cannot help asking, "But is this **really** the place where ...? One of the sites that

struck me as quite likely to be the “real place”, was the site traditionally identified as the location of the Sermon on the Mount, (assuming, of course, that it was given on a hill as Matthew states rather than on a plain as in Luke’s Gospel.) The traditional location is on a gentle hillside a mile or so west of and a few hundred feet above the Sea of Galilee, in the midst of the area where Jesus spent much of his 3 years of ministry. A beautiful spot, with a view of the entire 13 mile span of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus began his discourse talking with the four disciples he had called at that point. But the location was apparently an easy walk for the crowds, since Matthew’s account concludes with Jesus saying: *The crowds were amazed at his teaching because he was teaching them like someone with authority and not like their legal experts.* 7:28-29 CEB

Our reading is a small part of the Sermon on the Mount. In an earlier part of this discourse, Jesus says something particularly pertinent for our Leviticus reading:

Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them. I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter or even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality. 5:17-18 CEB

In today’s Gospel reading, instead of the command of a proportionate response, “an eye for an eye”, Jesus proclaims:

“you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don’t refuse those who wish to borrow from you.” 5:39-42 CEB

And there is more (or, should I say, it gets worse):

“Love your enemies and pray those who harass you because of your faith.... [For God] makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? . . . Therefore, just as your Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.” 5:44-48 CEB

Do you hear it? The bottom line of our Leviticus and Gospel of Matthew readings are consistent: Be holy for God is Holy; be complete in showing love for everyone as God shows love for everyone.

Wonderful words, but perhaps they make us want to get back to miracles, crucifixion, resurrection. Jesus words are so difficult if we take them literally; they seem impossible.

There have been many attempts to escape a literal reading of what Jesus said. One tactic is to immediately admit failure and go on to something else. The argument goes like this: Jesus gave us this impossible standard to demonstrate our sinfulness and inability to save ourselves; thus we can ignore Jesus' teaching and instead rely on Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins. In other words, don't worry; Jesus died for us and his death solves everything.

Another evasive tactic is to talk about supposed first century culture. A slap on the cheek with the back of one's hand was supposed to be a cultural insult; by turning one's head one somehow prevents a second slap with the back of the hand. In other words, use 1st century culture to divert our attention from what Jesus said.

A third tactic for avoiding having to live according to Jesus' teaching is to say that Jesus didn't expect us to live according to this standard; he just hoped that by giving us such a high standard, our feeble attempts to comply will marginally improve our behavior.

If we read the entire Sermon on the Mount - Matthew 5, 6 and 7 - it becomes more than obvious, I would suggest, that Jesus is not giving us abstract principles or impossible standards; he is teaching about how those who follow him are to actually live their lives. He expects us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies. He expects us to reject a culture of violence, getting even, competition, self centered focus, me first, retaliation and so on. Jesus is calling us to a new life, a holy life, based on God's values, a life completely at odds with the values of our culture, a life where we think first of the other and the common good. Jesus' words are not an impossible goal we must dismiss or give up on. Jesus means exactly what he says: those who follow him must forfeit, in the face of evil, their right to use violence to strike back, their right to seek restitution or to use the courts to punish. We are charged with loving and praying for those who commit violence or otherwise oppose us.

I must pause here and say that Jesus is talking about not striking back in the face of violence; he is not necessarily suggesting passive acquiescence in the face of violence and harm by not leaving. How this plays out in the context of what we call domestic abuse is a complex topic that requires more than a homily, perhaps by someone more thoughtful than I am. But I would be willing to discuss this problem on a one-to-one basis with anyone.

I know our Gospel passage raises a thousand questions and brings a million hypothetical situations come to mind. Practical ethics - living ethically day in and day out, which is what Jesus is talking about - is not easy. And Jesus is only giving the basic principles around which we must fashion our lives. One of the great strengths of

living in a community of faith is that, together with our sisters and brothers in Christ, we can reflect together on these principles and how they may play out in our day to day lives. The men's group, women's group, faith formation classes, and one-on-one conversations are offered for just this reason.

Our calling is to be holy for God is holy; to show love for everyone as God shows love for everyone, to live day to day as citizens of the Kingdom of God. God who is love, showers us with grace upon grace and will empower us to be gracious, generous, forgiving and hospitable. If we choose this life as a disciple of Christ, our loving God will enable us to live this life.

Jesus' concludes the Sermon on the Mount with these words:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods come, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn't fall because it was firmly set on bedrock. But everybody who hears these words of mine and doesn't put them into practice will be like a fool who built a house on sand. The rain fell, the floods come, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It fell and was completely destroyed. 7:24-27 CEB

Amen

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February 23, 2014