

“You Have Heard It Said” – Mat 5:38-48

This morning we continue our series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel. Fortunately the harsh and vitriolic tone seems to have worn off so that by the time we have arrived at this text we are not nearly so pained nor offended as we might have been by the selections from the previous two weeks. Today, in contrast with those previous readings we have a pair of sayings that seem to make sense; however, as is the case with so much of the bible, we tend to have an abbreviated memory of what the text actually says and so as usual we need to look a little deeper.

We can readily identify the two sections of this selection of text by the opening statement in each. That statement is a structured formula and contains a contrast between “you have heard it said ...” and “but I tell you ..”, an expression that was apparently a common teaching technique used by rabbi’s in Jesus’ day. The technique of course draws people in by getting them to agree (“why, yes, I have heard that said”) and then shows how their understanding is either inadequate, incomplete, or just plain wrong. That technique still works today – and who knows – if you watch carefully, you might even see an example of that technique right here in this sermon!

The first of these two teachings is the familiar “turn the other cheek” saying which is set against the practice of “an eye for an eye.” I suspect our normal reaction is “of course” since we feel we live in a society that already decries the “eye for an eye” retribution. However, there seems to be a persistent move back towards that kind of retributive justice, with the populace and the government both calling for tougher laws and even tougher penalties, with longer sentences and harsher prison treatments. So if the calls here to tolerance, to leniency, to compassionate treatment seem to us to be somewhat startling, consider for a moment just how radical such urgings were in Jesus’ own day. His was a society in which the “eye for an eye” principal was literally carried out, a society not far removed from those of today in which a thief’s right hand is cut off – and did you ever stop to realize it is the right hand that is removed, forcing the penitent to now eat with the same hand that is normally used for other bodily functions?!

The issue of the coat and cloak has lost some of its impact as well. The coat was the long undergarment, the cloak was worn over top of that. What we might fail to realize is that the cloak was also used as a blanket at night, and so the teaching here is not only to give up some clothing, but to give up any hope of comfort during the night as well – an urging not just to double the take but to add bonus upon bonus.

How about “that extra mile”? In our usage it has become a very watered-down suggestion, requiring not much extra effort. In Jesus’ day, however, it was a more literal issue. Not many of us realize that in Jesus’ day the Roman soldiers who occupied the land had the right to conscript anybody to carry their gear (shields, food, duffel bag, maybe even spare armour) for a literal mile – a conscription service required of civilians. The equivalent today would be a soldier in Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan pointing to a civilian and saying, “you, pick that up and come with me!” – oh wait, doesn’t that happen today also? No protest was tolerated, no complaining was allowed, just hump some armed bully’s gear the full mile, even at the end of a long day toiling in the fields to satisfy the tax collector. So can you hear just how radical, even how hated this call to offer extra voluntary service would be in Jesus’ day? And yet there it is, a clear and clarion call to a compassionate response to injustice and injury; an urging to a kinder, gentler way of life.

The second of these two teachings, a new view on “love your neighbour; hate your enemy”, is not only related to the first but also can be seen as a radical expansion on that call to

compassion. If one hears and heeds the call to return kindness to injury or insult, our normal human response would be to say, “well, ok, but only to family, or to people I know and respect.” To make it abundantly clear that Jesus’ call to compassion is not just for favourite loved ones, this second part expands that to include everyone, even or especially enemies and the unlovable. Talk about going the extra mile – this is a whole new journey for most people! But doesn’t it fit? The same people who in an interview on TV who would be calling for ‘justice’ against a stranger by demanding, “throw the bum in jail and toss away the key!” this week are likely to be the same people a week later defending a favoured son saying, “oh, but he’s really such a good boy, and deserves a break!”

The message here is really quite clear that it is not just friends and family who are to be loved, but even those who are right nasty. And while there is some logic to it – you may have seen or heard the quip, “Love your enemies; it messes with their minds” – like the previous teaching it is way more difficult to put into practice. Mind you, not many people are open in their unloving responses. Some of us take what is now called ‘passive-aggressive’ behaviour to a new level, finding ever-more-subtle ways to ‘get back at’ someone who has wronged us, and thereby ever deepening the spiral of mistreatment and retribution.

And this second message is at least as radical as the first, calling not just for loving enemies but also asking God to bless those who persecute you. The image and implicit charge of being no better than the Gentiles provides a painful pricking of the balloons of the righteous, those who would claim that sinners and foreigners are not deserving of such generous treatment. Of course, Jesus would go on to point out that the righteous are no more deserving of such generous treatment by God, whose grace and mercy and forgiveness shine down upon all people.

“Well, OK”, we nod in agreement. “We get it”, we think to ourselves. But do we? When we read in the paper or hear on the news that new tougher laws are being enacted by our governments, do we silently think “that’s a good move”, or do we feel that this is one more step backwards away from what this gospel text is calling us to do and be? When we hear that hundreds of millions of our tax dollars are going to build new prison facilities not to rehabilitate but primarily to punish offenders do we silently nod, or do we write a letter of protest? When we hear that the homeless are being pushed out of our neighbourhood by the police do we rejoice, or do we wish that there was a better way to solve the problem, for example free or affordable housing, or are we offended by someone seeming to “get something for nothing” in our he-who-gets-the-most-gold-wins society?

Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you; turn the other cheek; give your cloak also; go that extra mile – these are all such familiar adages from our faith. So familiar indeed that they roll on by without having anything like the impact on us that they should. So easy to say, so difficult to do. But they truly lie at the heart of displaying the kind of grace and mercy that was both shown to us by God in Christ Jesus and called for from us by Jesus himself. These are the very examples of love that Christ demonstrated in his ministry, and even in his death and resurrection. We are but a couple of weeks away from the season of Lent in which we will focus more and more upon how completely Jesus lived out these very instructions to the fullest. Even here, however, in the midst of a series of what seem like harsh and radical teachings we can see how those teachings convey the love, the mercy, the compassion, the grace of God. A love so complete, so deep, so wide that it encompasses friend and foe, family and enemy, righteous and sinner, Jew and Gentile, male and female alike. A love that means these identities are no longer at odds but complimentary, people sharing the same gift of reconciliation offered by God in Christ.

So, do we really “get it?” Are we willing, even if not totally able, to really extend ourselves, to go “that extra mile?” Are we resolved in our faith to overcome the barriers that separate people, to forgive injustices done to us? I believe that we are, but sometimes the threshold seems a little too high to cross – it seems like a major change. The answer is to take it in little, easily-manageable steps. Steps that begin with a subtle shift in mindset; a shift from hearing these adages as familiar to hearing them with discernment – pausing when we hear them to reflect for a moment as to whether our actions are consistent with our beliefs. From such a subtle shift in mindset comes a powerful shift in who we are and how we act; a shift that extends not only our faith but our entire being, and helps us to respond to Christ’s urgings in ways that reflect what he has done for us. Doing so is a powerful way to offer our thanks to God for the redemption and reconciliation we have found in Christ’s loving sacrifice.