

Title: "Thou Shalt Not Be A Jerk"
11/21/2021
Deuteronomy 5.17-21 Matthew 5.38-48
Series: What Happened to Empathy?!
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Matthew 5:38-48 (NRSV)

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Long ago and far away when I played high school football for that rival team who must not be named – especially in the week before Turkey Day.....one of the lessons our offensive line coach taught us was the "Golden Rule" of football! Now, here at church, the version of the Golden Rule with which we are most familiar is: "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you!" Jesus offers this wisdom in the seventh chapter of Matthew, just a little after today's Gospel lesson. Both of these texts from Matthew are part of Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount. And it is this sermon, at least as far as Matthew is concerned, where Jesus lays out his theological agenda –his reasoning rooted in the person of God - for the public ministry he is just embarking on.

For Jesus, life is all about how we treat people.....how we treat people on their good days; and even more so how we treat them on their bad days.....on those days when someone is hurting and angry and confused and anxious and deeply afraid.....on those days when someone is less than they normally are –less in control; and less kind; and less aware of how their words and actions impact and affect others.....on those days, like we all have from time to time, is when Jesus says we must pay the most attention to how we treat others.

I'm sorry.....I'm just realizing that I got carried away, talking about Jesus and his directional priorities for ministry and forgot to share my coach's words –I can't call it wisdom – concerning the Golden Rule of football. Boys, he told us with a smile, the Golden Rule of football is, 'Do it unto the other guy before he does it unto you!' And that's how he coached us.

Sadly, I think that this doing to others before it is done to us is the primary directional message that most of us receive fairly early in life.....the message which proclaims that if we're going to protect ourselves from the harm, and the pain, and the damage that others may potentially inflict on us.....then we have to always be on the offensive; we have to always be guarding ourselves by keeping those around us on the defensive. For, if we hurt them first, then they probably won't be able to hurt us; if we push them away first, then they can't do the same to us; if we are the first to build emotional and physical barriers around us, then no one will be able to get inside our heads and hearts and batter us around.....

Such moves on our part certainly aren't what Jesus calls us to do and be for others.....but this kind of behavior on our part keeps us safe.....or so we like to think. But does it really?! Certainly, there can be a sense of satisfaction in verbally zinging someone and putting them in the lesser place where we think they need to be. Such behavior can be addictive, providing a cheap, temporary high.....yet, from following Jesus around as we have for some time, we know that putting others down to lift ourselves up is not how he wants us to treat others. Inflicting pain on another for our own needs, whether it is intentional or not, is not what love does.

Love is patient, and love is kind.....and in Jesus' understanding of the world, love is best expressed by turning the other cheek when somebody strikes us emotionally or physically.....and love is best expressed by giving our shirt as well as our coat when someone demands it of us.....

and love is best expressed by going a second mile with those who would try to take advantage of us.....and love is best expressed by praying for, and actively caring for those who hate us, and those who would harm or do harm us if given the chance.

John Pavlovitz, author of the book, *If God Is Love, Don't Be A Jerk: Finding A Faith That Makes Us Better Humanism*, has some wonderful words about Jesus' expectations of us. He says: "Jesus' command to love our neighbors and our enemies does not come with guarantees that we won't offend or bring discomfort or create turbulence (as sometimes love surely does these very things) but Jesus is telling us to keep our hearts as blameless as we can while we do so. He is commanding us to seek our better angels in the trenches of relational disconnect by making every effort not to harm. He is cautioning us against being cruel in his name.....partly because of the way we ourselves are transformed as we lean into compassion, and partly because most people are already pretty beat up and could use a little kindness." (Pavlovitz, p.50) This last thought Pavlovitz expresses, about the fact that most people, that most of us, are already pretty wounded and fragile, is, to my mind, incredibly significant.....significant because it is true, and significant because it is right in line with Jesus' expectations of us. When we have an awareness of the pain of others, we carry a heart less prone to cause hurt!

Our practice of empathy ultimately comes down to our awareness of the pain and brokenness and fragility of others. Our practice of empathy starts with our being less aware of and less concerned with our own needs, and our own hurts so we can instead be aware of and focused on others, and what they need in order to be more whole and more complete. Jesus knows that we are transformed

when we practice compassion on behalf of others and this is the behavior, the conduct, the way of life he invites us to be about every day and all the time.

As we've noted in previous sermons, our call as disciples to practice empathy is hard and unrelenting. We are to show empathy on our good days, and especially on our bad days. We are to show empathy to those we don't like, to those who would make our life harder, to those who would kick us when we're done. I don't think Jesus expects perfection from us when it comes to empathy, because sometimes we are the ones who need empathy. But, Jesus demands that even in our weakest moments, even when we are at our worst, and especially when it is hard.....that empathy for others be our first priority, and be who we are!

One of the neat things about spiritual homework is that it is there for us every day! Every day it is our privilege, it is our responsibility, it is our calling to let empathy flow from us in every direction, and upon everyone all of the time.

How are we doing in our practice of empathy? There is always time and opportunity as followers of Jesus for us to be all about how we treat others. Amen!!!

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John Pavlovitz, *If God Is Love, Don't Be A Jerk: Finding A Faith That Makes Us Better Humans*