

“ACTIONS OF FAITH”

Matthew 5:38-48 February 19, 2017

The phrases of the Sermon on the Mount are so familiar and beautiful we can almost forget how demanding they are. “Turn the other cheek.” “Go the second mile.” “Love your enemies.” “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” How lovely, how close to home, how...impossible. Love your *enemies*? Respond to the fist by opening yourself up to more fists? Pray for your *persecutors*? As if that’s not enough, *be perfect*. The final commandment is given as an afterthought: “Oh yes, and besides all that, be flawless.” Right. So, where do we start?!?!

I’d like to start today by going back to the story that Mary shared with the children this morning, only without the visuals and recapping the story for a moment:

Once upon a time, in a land much like ours, there were some weary travelers who came to a village with nothing but a cooking pot. They found a place to camp near some water, filled up their pot, and put it over the fire. Then they took a large stone and put it in the pot as it simmered.

A villager saw this, became curious, and asked what they were cooking. They explained that they were making a wonderful dish called stone soup that they would be happy to share with the village. They just needed a few small things to make it extra flavorful. The villager decides that he can part with a few carrots and adds them to the pot. Another villager sees them and contributes some potatoes, and so on and so forth until there is a wonderful, nourishing soup to be enjoyed by all.

This folk tale slyly illustrates what the concept of gleaning can look like in a community. By each contributing some, there is always enough for all. In the story, the villagers were sort of tricked into contributing, but they did contribute on their own accord because they believed the end result would be something great.

And it was. But it would not have been if they decided to keep their doors locked and never spoke to the strangers among them.

In the story, the stone was the base for the soup, with the villagers building upon that. In a similar way, our foundation is Jesus Christ, and we must choose with care how we build on it—individually and as a community. We are the body of Christ, we belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to God. All parts of us belong to God: all our hurt, all our joy, all our imperfections. If we believe that God’s spirit Dwells us, that means that God’s Spirit dwells in others, too, whether we like it or not.

This should matter to us. This should change us. It should transform us into being perfect as our “heavenly Father is perfect.” Not an ethical or moral perfection, but perfection in the Hebrew sense of the word “*tamim*,” which means “wholeness.” To be perfect is to serve God wholeheartedly and to be single-minded in our devotion to God. That is what we are striving for in this lifelong journey with Jesus.

If we are striving for wholeness in God, then our lives as disciples will show it. Our love is not one of vengeful retaliation, as we see in our gospel story today. Instead our love extends even to our enemies, because that is what God calls us to be and do: actions of faith. The thoughts and feelings that are inside us are acted out through the actions of our bodies. Are we God’s dwelling place? If so, how does anyone know?

Jesus calls us to radical hospitality—for ourselves and for others. God loved us first so that we would know what love is, and because of our love of God, we are able to love ourselves and love others. Jesus constantly challenges us with this. He said: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...For if you love those who

love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” Tax collectors were despised in Jewish culture for being unpatriotic and were seen as unclean for coming into contact with gentiles.

Jesus continued: “And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?” The gentiles were considered unclean and unbelievers in Jewish culture, and to be compared to them was insulting. Jesus calls the disciples—us—to a higher standard than this. God’s love is seen in the world when communities are concerned with compassion, justice, and care of everyone, especially the most vulnerable.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also tells the disciples to turn the other cheek, forgo revenge, give more than the required in a lawsuit, go the extra mile, give to all who beg, and lend without limits. Put those together with the admonitions to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us and--- we are challenged to do things that seem contrary to human nature. Jesus highlights the surprises that characterize life in God’s realm; he challenges the disciples to do the opposite of what seems normal and reasonable. He is saying things that make us chafe, that make us uncomfortable.

In a world that is “all about me,” Jesus offers an alternative we find difficult to even imagine, much less to actually try to live! Today who can be perfect? It is easier to be mean, hold grudges, ignore those in need. If I give myself to everyone who begs, I will have nothing left for myself. If I turn the other cheek, I will get slapped again. If I get sued, I am hiring the best lawyer I can afford to find a loophole in my favor. If I love my enemies, I will be more persecuted or even killed. If I am too nice, I will be seen as weak, a pushover, a doormat.

We might not say these things out loud, but some may feel exactly this way!

For others, these feelings may be justified---African Americans still suffering the lingering effects of slavery and race discrimination, Japanese nations and Japanese Americans who live with the tattooed numbers of the internment from World War II; survivors of the Holocaust; women who make less money than men doing the same job; and those around the globe who suffer at the hands of the oppressors. Jesus' call to forgive and be reconciled rings hollow with unattainable goals.

Jesus does state what the payoff will be: to inherit the reign of God. What do we get for loving, forgiving, being kind and gracious, and offering generosity? Some of us are too suspicious of the outcome and may resist living the values of God's realm. We are more intent on making sure no one has a chance to abuse or tyrannize us again. Some of us are so stubborn we would rather be right than be in relationship with others.

But while Jesus' instructions in this scripture may be Jesus at his ornery best, the wisdom offered here is not at all new, despite the formulation, "You have heard it said...but I say to you." In terms of *content*, Jesus offers here nothing he did not learn at Mary's knee. It is in terms of the *speaker* that these words take on their importance for us. Our constant temptation to boil down the hard particulars of Jesus into some kind of mushy, vague faith suitable for a Hallmark card, is here banished once and for all!! Jesus, in all his Jewish, biblical demands of us, will have none of it!

"The Lord who accompanies us on our journey offers his own cheek to slaps and his shoulders to whips, to the increase of his glory," one ancient teacher said. We are called here to love as God loves. This cannot be out of our own resources. So this is not really an admonition to try harder—if it were, it would indeed be a recipe for despair. It is a plan of action rooted in the promise to be

made “children of your Father in heaven” (v. 45). The Sermon here and elsewhere is a portrait of the very heart of God, one who loves the unlovable, comes among us in Christ, suffers our worst, and rises to forgive us. Turn the cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy—because that is how God loves. If you want to follow this God, fleshed In Jesus, you will be adopted into a life in which you find yourself loving this way before you know what you are doing.

One thing this text expressly is NOT is an admonition doomed to failure—a word of judgment meant to drive us into the arms of grace. It will seem that way if taken as an isolated moral admonition for straining heroes to accomplish thru their lonely determination, like marathon runners. If, however, this is a blueprint for the life of the church, for us as disciples of the Lord we love and serve, then we have a chance.

Jason Byassee tells the story of a friend of his who grew up with missionary parents in a favela in Brazil. Asked how her family could live among the poorest of the world’s poor without danger of being robbed, she said, “Simple. You can’t own anything anyone would want to steal.” Lend to anyone who asks, give to all who want to borrow. Then you can live among God’s poor and receive the blessing of possessing nothing. For Jesus, God incarnate, possesses nothing, except our hearts.

We are amazed by people’s capacity to do things that defy our natural instinct; the survivor of a violent crime who is able to forgive her tormentor; black South Africans who work with their former oppressors to rebuild their country; the Mother Teresas of the world who give selfless service to outcasts; those who live modestly so they can contribute to the well-being of the less fortunate; and those who make a choice to commit to random acts of kindness. We are surrounded by

examples of unselfish love and caring; we need only look for them. God's realm is already active and moving toward fulfillment.

Stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers abound with monks living these extreme directives of Jesus. Hearing "love your enemies" expressed through a tradition not my own underscores for me the radical teachings of Jesus, especially when an individual puts that love into practice.

The same Abba Macarius while he was in Egypt discovered a man who owned a beast of burden engaged in plundering Macarius' goods. So he came up to the thief as if he was a stranger and he helped him to load the animal. He saw him off in great peace of soul saying, 'We have brought nothing into this world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.' (1 Tim. 6:7) 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed by the name of the Lord.' (Job 1:21)

Another story taken from the Life of St. John the Almsgiver from the Early 7th century:

Whilst this same crowd of people (refugees from Syria) was still in the city (Alexandria), one of the strangers, noticing John (the Almsgiver's) remarkable sympathy, determined to try the blessed man; so he put on old clothes, and approached him as he was on his way to visit the sick in the hospitals—for he did this two or three times a week—and said to him: "Have mercy upon me for I am a prisoner of war."

John said to his purse-bearer: "Give him six nomismata." After the man had received these he went off, changed his clothes, met John again in another street, and falling at his feet said: "Have pity upon me for I am in want." The Patriarch again said to his purse bearer: "Give him six nomismata."

As he went away the purse-bearer whispered in the patriarch's ear:

“By your prayers, master, this same man has had alms from you twice over!” But the Patriarch pretended not to understand. Soon the man came again for the third time to ask for money and the attendant, carrying the gold, nudged the Patriarch to let him know that it was the same man; whereupon the truly merciful and beloved of God said: “Give him twelve nomismata, for perchance it is my Christ and He is making trial of me.”

Thomas Merton in the Wisdom of the Desert tells this story about a stolen book.

Abbot Anastasius had a book written on very fine parchment which was worth eighteen pence, and had in it both the old and New Testaments in full. Once a certain brother came to visit him, and seeing the book made off with it. So that day when Abbot Anastasius went to read his book, and found that it was gone, he realized that the brother had taken it. But he did not send after him to inquire about it for fear that the brother might add perjury to theft. Well, the brother went down into the nearby city in order to sell the book. And the price he asked was sixteen pence. The buyer said: Give me that book that I may find out whether it is worth that much. With that, the buyer took the book to the holy Anasasius and said: Father, take a look at this book, please, and tell me whether you think I ought to buy it for sixteen pence. Is it worth that much? Abbot Anastasius said: Yes, it is a fine book and is worth that much. So the buyer went back to the brother and said: Here is your money. I showed the book to Abbot Anastasius and he said it is a fine book and is worth at least sixteen pence. But the brother asked: Was that all he said? Did he make any other remarks? No, said the buyer, he did not say another word. Well, said the brother, I have changed my mind and I don't want to sell this book after all. Then he hastened to Abbot Anastasius and begged him with tears to take back his book, but the Abbot would not accept it, saying; Go in peace, brother, I make you a present of it. But the brother said: If you do not take it back I shall never have any peace. After that the brother dwelt with Abbot Anastasius for the rest of his life.

One more illustration about loving your enemies goes like this: I remember a Tibetan monk who had been tortured in a Chinese prison for 22 years. When he reached Dharamsala, the Dali Lama asked him: “What were you scared

of the most in prison?” He replied: “It was that I might lose my compassion towards the torturers.” (Sulak Sivaraksa)

Look around you in the pews today, or when you’re at work or school, or on the street. Catch someone’s eye. Hold eye contact for a moment and really look at them. See them as God sees them—precious and holy—a child of God. This may be difficult, especially if you feel someone is your enemy, but as Frederick Buechner wrote in his book Whistling in the Dark :

“Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them, meaning love not in an emotional sense but in the sense of willing their good, which is the sense in which we love ourselves....You see where they’re vulnerable. You see where they’re scared. Seeing what is hateful about them, you may catch a glimpse also of where the hatefulness comes from. Seeing the hurt they cause you, you may see also the hurt they cause themselves. You’re still light-years away from loving them, to be sure, but at least you see how they are human even as you are human, and that is at least a step in the right direction.”

How would it feel to be seen like that? What is it like to know that you are loved by God with such utter completeness? Hopefully, it is life changing. Hopefully, this love reminds us that we are all part of something greater—a community that is larger and more understanding than we know. Hopefully, we will know that we are cared for by a God who really sees us and invites us to share what we have for soup, no matter if we think it’s fitting or not.

This is what it means to be God’s dwelling place in the world—our hearts have changed and our actions of love for one another make the soup what it is: a dish that people want to gather around and be part of this community of faith and love. With God’s help, let it be so. Amen and Amen.