



“Kind, Gentle, Radical and Peculiar”

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 and Matthew 5:38-48

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February 20, 2011

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

We continue this morning with a look at the Sermon on the Mount. And yet again...as with all of our readings from the Sermon on the Mount...the central underlying theme is the Kingdom of God...or what Matthew calls the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our text...lifts up a handful of fundamental Christian ideals...and two in particular stand out: “Turning the other cheek” and “loving your enemy.” Not only do these capture the spirit of our passage today...but arguably, they also capture the spirit of Christianity.

There is a saying about the Bible that goes something like this: the Bible is the best known...least read work of all time. Well I think we can say something similar about today’s passage.

“Turning the other cheek”...and “loving your enemy”...these are quite possibly...the best known...but least followed...of Christian ideals.

But if this is true...it’s also not very surprising. Christ has laid before us...some pretty difficult ideals to follow. There is nothing natural about these two...or any of the other ideals in this text. They all run directly counter to our natural, self-protective instincts.

And yet...following Christ...this gets to the heart of what our faith is supposed to do for us. We are supposed to look to Christ...as head of the Church...as our guide.

I think today’s reading can be interpreted on two levels. At one level, we can hear wonderful...albeit difficult...thoughts about how to live in community. And at the other level...we can hear, albeit more subtly...thoughts that can cause serious waves for communities. This second hearing or interpretation...it can be far more frightening.

This passage cuts two ways. It truly is a double-edged sword.

And so I want to look at both levels...first, the hearing that sets out ways to live in community...which is actually the more comfortable way to see the text.

And then...later...the hearing that speaks to challenging the status quo...to challenging social structures...what I see as the more subversive part.

The first way to interpret the passage...it’s the less literal reading of the text.

When we think of the ideals in this text...not just “turning the other cheek” and “loving enemies”...but also...giving up one’s cloak...or going the extra mile...or giving help to all who request it...these are all extraordinarily magnanimous and charitable gestures.

I think these ideas capture...the kind...merciful...and generous Christ who is lifted up so often in beautiful and profound Christian music.

Here, Christ is saying...don't retaliate...be bigger than your attacker...set an example for your adversary. Maybe they will learn something from you. In this way, you are a light to the world...you are showing them the Kingdom of God.

This passage is about being so eager to be helpful...that you go above and beyond what is expected. If someone asks you to go a mile...go two. And if they want your coat...give them your under-cloak.

This is an attitude of generosity far beyond any normal standard.

And the passage is also about loving everyone...not just friends...or family...but everyone including enemies...even when...no especially when...you think they don't deserve it.

No, there is nothing natural here...but just imagine if everyone followed these ideals. This is really a vision of a perfect life...the Kingdom of Heaven...where selflessness abounds.

And isn't this what we expect from God. Isn't this the kind of God we pray to? I know this is what I'm thinking when I get on my knees. I think of God as a perfectly loving parent.

And so...to me...it's not surprising that Christ sums it all up by saying: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

What we are hearing from Christ...in this first interpretation...this really is like a parent talking to their children: don't hit back...be kind...be gentle...be generous...be extra helpful.

And don't these ideals also capture what we think of as "our better selves"? Don't retaliate...let go of your grudges...be kind and humble. Yes, aren't we happiest...in our best moods...when we have this kind of spirit in our hearts?

And if this really is when we are happiest...why don't we always act this way? Oh...don't worry about those annoying things...or that annoying person. Just do what you know is good...what Christ is telling you is right. In other words...as Christ says: **just be perfect.**

Well, I don't know about you...but I'm not quite there yet.

But...the way I read the text...Christ is telling us that this is OK. Ironically, I see this in his instruction to be perfect.

Just as in last week's passage about banishing anger and lust...God knows that we are far from perfect. God knows that all of these ideals run counter to human instinct. Of course God does...Christ was a human being after all.

But, in the reminder to be perfect...I sense that Christ is reminding us that we are not perfect.

But just because we are not perfect...this doesn't make these wonderful ideals any less important to strive toward.

And so...let's move on to the other way to interpret this passage...the other part of this double-edged sword...the even more challenging...and, I think, more frightening way to see today's passage.

One reason it's frightening is because we know how things ended for Christ. Christ was no hypocrite. He didn't only talk about turning the other cheek...and loving his enemies.

It's a gigantic understatement to say that Christ was a man of his word. He refused to engage adversaries in tit for tat...even though it might have saved his life. And among his dying words were..."forgive them Father, for they know not what they do."

And precisely because this second level reading of this passage is more frightening...more subversive...it is the vision of Christ that tends to get more obscured in modern Christianity.

So many of us prefer to think of the gentle and kind aspect of Christ...and not subversive aspect. But, because both are valid...we need to look at both.

And this more radical side...before we jump further into it...there is a very important warning that needs to be made.

It's a concern about blindly and too literally applying this passage to life...especially the part about turning the other cheek. I can make this point with a simple example: Just think of the battered wife...for that matter the battered anybody.

This text is not about inviting abuse. Christ did not **ask** to be killed.

This isn't about purposeless recklessness. No...this second interpretation...it's about purposeful subversion. And this kind of subversion...it can come with risks. Maybe this text should come with a warning label.

This passage...really Christ's entire life, death and resurrection...they have profound social and political implications...that challenge the status quo.

Social implications in the way he focused on those outside the power structure. And political implications...in the way his ideas challenged the religious authorities...and the Roman overlords. He was bound to upset some people.

Seeing today's reading in the context of ancient times will help reveal some of these more radical implications.

Apparently in the day, slapping the **right** cheek...this was what masters did to servants and slaves...with the blow being about asserting control. In an incredibly hierarchical society...this commonly accepted action was apparently about rank.

Now, just imagine the look on an overlord's face if a servant offered his **left** cheek, as if inviting the second blow.

This could easily be interpreted as an almost sarcastic gesture. It is easy to imagine how this gesture could be seen as mocking...revealing the cruelty of the master.

Now it is far from clear that Christ was telling servants or slaves to literally challenge their masters in this way.

But it is likely that...servants who knew all too well the social mores of the day...including about striking servants...they would immediately see what Christ was saying...see it as condemnation of the remarkable injustices of their circumstances.

And the same can be said about two other examples here. Christ probably picked the word "sue" because peasants did not have the ability to sue each other...courts were only available to the well connected. Here again, our passage appears to be about the privileged abusing the poor.

Imagine a peasant who might literally own only the coat on his back...this likely is how they would hear the text: *oh...you want my coat...you want to sue me for it...why don't you take my undergarment as well. Is that how greedy you are?*

Also in those days, Roman soldiers were apparently permitted to conscript civilians to carry their packs...**but for only up to a mile.**

And so imagine the implications of a peasant's offer to go a second mile: *I'm busy now...trying to scratch out a living...but let me get this straight...you want me to drop everything to carry your pack?*

This kind of gesture would have likely embarrassed the soldier...pointing out the cruelty of both... this rule...and the soldier. And that is almost certainly how Christ's typical audience would have heard it.

Seen in context, these words from Christ imply more than just refusing to strike back or retaliate. They can also be seen as shining a **bright hot spotlight** on societal injustices...telling truth to power.

And so when we step back again from today's passage...we really can start to see the double-edged quality of what Christ has to say.

On the one hand, following his words...or the spirit of his words...can be the kind and generous thing to do...the stuff that keeps the peace...that holds communities together. The stuff of the Kingdom of God.

But embracing these ideals can also be subversive....a bold and maybe even radical mentality that doesn't shy away from bullies. Also the stuff of the Kingdom of God.

I want to share something that I don't often speak about.

Not infrequently I ask myself...whether when a time of serious trial comes...a time of moral dilemma...a time when decisions might even have life and death consequences...whether I'll have the fortitude to step forward and display the courage of my convictions...regardless of consequences.

When we peel back the layers of today's passage, I think we are all being asked this kind of question. In fact, I think this question gets at part of what today's text is trying to do to us...and in us.

Like last week's passage...really the entire Sermon on the Mount...Christ is trying to shape our character. He is trying to prepare us to react in a Christian way...when called upon.

Whether in our charitable and peace-keeping attitude that builds up our communities...or in being bold, courageous or even radical to challenge our communities.

Yes, these are important questions...not only because we want to live lovingly in community...but also because every once in a while...citizens are confronted with gut-wrenching moral dilemmas. And Christ is preparing us.

Just think if more people in Nazi Germany...hadn't hidden behind their curtains...and instead had been like Dietrich Bonhoeffer...willing to openly challenge Nazi ideas...and then, at the point of exasperation...to do something so bold that it went directly against his own beloved Sermon on the Mount.

He participated in a plot to assassinate Hitler...he finally chose not to turn the other cheek. He paid for it with his life. And my guess is that...not only did God forgive him...but that Christ welcomed him home with open arms.

And just think if more people had been like Martin Luther King. He refused to slow down his movement...as so many counseled. He refused to be cowed by the threats and attempts on his life.

And in synch with his Christian beliefs...he refused to allow the movement to become violent. He pressed ahead...until he shook this country...and changed it. Sadly, he too paid for it with his life.

And so...with these sad...but powerful examples in our minds...our reading seems to be telling us **two** things. First, it is important to be...solid Christians...solid citizens...refusing to retaliate...going the extra mile...treating all with decency. Christ shows us this.

But Christ also seems to be showing us that doing the right thing...every once in a while...it can also be radical...and even dangerous.

Bonheoffer and King. We talk about these men a lot here at Plymouth...with good reason. These were both men who were truly counter-cultural...two men who had no qualms about confronting evil. They lived as if the Kingdom of God was not merely an idea. They lived as if it was a reality.

And the funny thing is that they used similar words...to describe the mentality necessary...to live life as they did. Bonheoffer said that...one has to be "peculiar"...and King said that one has to be "maladjusted."

There is an emphasis in our society...in any society...on fitting in. After all, this is human nature.

But apparently in the Kingdom of God...it's also a good thing to be a bit peculiar...a bit maladjusted.

Amen.

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