

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK

Matthew 5:38-48

A homily given by Larry R. Hayward, February 19, 2017, the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.”

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Over the past four Sundays, without consciously planning a sermon series, Casey and I have more or less provided a series on the Sermon on the Mount.

- I covered the Beatitudes on January 29 (“Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn...”)
- On February 5, I followed with a sermon on the vaulted phrases “You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill.”
- Casey followed last week with a reading of the entire Sermon on the Mount, three chapters at the outset of Jesus’ ministry in Matthew, providing us a rare opportunity, as she says, to simply “sit with the text” and let it become a part of us.

Today I want to conclude this accidental series with an attempt to say how I have come to believe the Sermon on the Mount can serve as a cornerstone of our faith, as we live between the world as we know it and the world as God has redeemed it to be in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: *Lord, save me from stammering or being heavy of mouth; and let those who have ears to hear, hear. In the name of our living Redeemer we pray. Amen.*

I.

The Sermon on the Mount has its share of challenging phrases:

... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...

... if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well...

... if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile...

... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

... Give to everyone who begs from you...

... do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you...

Some Christian traditions take these passages literally:

- Refusing to strike back if attacked
- Refusing to defend others – even family members – from attack
- Refusing to serve in any kind of military effort or institution.

Other Christians take these sayings with *near* literalness:

- I know a professor of preaching in the Presbyterian Church who did not own a car, who always rented the smallest apartment in which he and his wife could fit, and who always carried a few dollars in his not recently purchased slacks so as to “give to everyone” who might beg from him.
- While Maggie and I live anything but a sacrificial lifestyle, we do almost always stop and give a dollar to the first person who asks us outside a Starbucks downtown or on Half Street walking into Nats stadium. There is something at least momentarily satisfying in “doing what Jesus did,” doing what Jesus taught us to do.

But rarely do I “turn the other cheek,” particularly if the one struck is a person or nation in need of rescue or defense, who need intervention provided by diplomats, asylum granters, police or military, who need a wise and measured use of the power of the state (or states) to contain if not conquer the evil with which they have been beset.

On a lighter note, at least one commentator has pointed out that if a defendant responded to a lawsuit by giving both coat and cloak to the plaintiff, at the end of the trial, the defendant would be left standing in front of judge and jury wearing no clothing at all.¹ Judge Judy would not approve.

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¹ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible Volume VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 194.

Preachers and teachers have from time to time sought to address the gap between the *demands of these words of Jesus* and *the world in which we seek to understand and live them out*. As I said in the first sermon in the series:

- Some have said the Sermon on the Mount is more a picture of the *life to come* than life we know now.
- Some have said the Sermon constitutes more a moral code for *church, monastery, utopian religious community* than marketplace, boardroom, negotiations between nations or battles between their troops.
- Some have said the Sermon on the Mount expresses *aspirations and ideals*, a universal moral code placed before us to call forth our best human and spiritual effort, no matter what culture in which we live or God we worship.
- And some have said the Sermon on the Mount contains *strategies* for advancing Christian faith in the world, such as “turning the other cheek” was an effective tool of Freedom Riders in the South and “carrying the coats” of Roman soldiers was effective in allowing early Christians to live out their faith quietly, without notice or threat of persecution, a way of “going along by getting along” that sometimes worked.

These are legitimate derivations and usages of the Sermon on the Mount, yet in my opinion, none is quite complete.

II.

So what is its truest purpose for us?

Two conversations I had this week – one with a live person at lunch, the other through the pages of a book – depict how I think the Sermon on the Mount can *best* function for us.

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I had a long scheduled lunch this past Wednesday with David Renwick, the Pastor of National Presbyterian Church. David has something I lack but in an “un-Sermon-on-the-Mount” way envy – a Ph.D. in New Testament. We were talking about what an ironic challenge it has been to preach the Sermon on the Mount in the divisive political climate in which we live. As the conversation evolved, he said that two of his professors at Union Seminary in Richmond had taught him that when the word “righteousness” appears in Matthew, as it does in the Sermon on the Mount,² “righteousness” does not simply mean *the absolute, uncompromising will of God*, but rather it means *doing* the will of God at the *right* time, in the *right* place, in the *right* manner. In other words, righteousness involves *choice* and *wisdom*, wisdom and choice, what we sometimes call *discernment*.

I immediately thought of Joseph in Matthew,³ the same gospel in which the Sermon appears, the young man, described as “righteous,” who, when he finds his fiancé Mary “with child,” resolves to divorce her but to do so in a way that seeks to protect her from public humiliation, religious shunning, or stoning, any of which a more strict and absolute reading of the religious law would prescribe.⁴ Thus, being “righteous” for Joseph involved coming to a decision to do the *right* thing at the *right* time in the *right* way. It did not involve following the law in its most literal or strict form, and his movement toward mercy was soon ratified and extended when an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...”

² Matthew 5:17: “...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

³ Matthew 1:18-25.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 22:13-21.

That same evening, after my conversation over lunch with David Renwick, I was working my way through a biography of Moses I am currently reading by a wonderful Jewish scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg.⁵

She points out that Moses is an amazing human and spiritual figure.

- Born Hebrew but rescued from the waters of the Nile and raised in the Egyptian court ⁶
- Called by God to lead his people Israel out of slavery in Egypt,⁷ but for reasons never entirely made clear, forbidden by God from leading them *into* the Promised Land himself ⁸
- Recipient and conveyer of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai,⁹ the Commandments on which the Sermon on the Mount is modeled,¹⁰ yet hindered throughout his life by a tremendous inability to speak, which scholars and artists have variously interpreted as a stammer, a speech impediment, lack of spiritual confidence perhaps out of his own dual identity as Hebrew and Egyptian, or, as the text simply says, Moses' own "heaviness of mouth."¹¹

In addition, throughout the first five books of the Bible, we see Moses as

- Anointer of the Temple and therefore recipient, at least momentarily, of the title of "Priest"¹²
- At least once place referred to as "King",¹³
- And yet instructed by God to turn his priestly garments over to his brother Aaron and choose his political successor Joshua.¹⁴

Though Aaron becomes Priest and Joshua leads the people of Israel into the Promised Land, it is *Moses* who is remembered in scripture by this characterization: "Now the man Moses was very humble [or devout], *more so* than anyone else on the face of the earth."¹⁵

⁵ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). See particularly pages 106-120.

⁶ Exodus 2:1-10.

⁷ Exodus 3:1-10.

⁸ Most reasons given in the Bible relate to Moses' apparent lack of trust in God providing water for the people of Israel in the wilderness, narrated in the Waters of Meribah incident in Numbers 20:1-13. This is echoed in Numbers 20:24, 27:14, Deuteronomy 32:50-52, and Psalm 106:32-33. Reasons not related to Meribah are alluded to in Deuteronomy 1:37, 3:25-29, and 4:21. Kafka writes in his *Diaries*: "[Moses] is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. The dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life, incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses failed to enter Canaan not because his life is too short but because it is a human life."

⁹ Exodus 20:1-17.

¹⁰ Parallels include the fact that both the Commandments and Sermon are given on a mountain, that they are similar in number (ten and nine respectively), and that they occur at inaugural moments (Israel poised to enter the Promised Land, Jesus beginning his ministry). In addition, Matthew structures his gospel into five sections, akin to the five books of Torah.

¹¹ In a moment of speech which is rare for Moses and brutally honest, Moses admits to lacking "eloquence" and being "slow of speech and slow of tongue," despite God having spoken to him. The latter phrases literally mean "heaviness of mouth." Exodus 6:10. This "heaviness of mouth" is at the heart of the eventually change of priestly leadership from Moses to Aaron.

¹² Leviticus 8:1-36.

¹³ Scholars see royal allusions concerning Moses in Deuteronomy 33:5; Exodus 14:31 and 34:10, and in Numbers 12:7.

¹⁴ Exodus 28:1-5.

¹⁵ Numbers 12:3.

Humble and devout. Greater than “anyone else on the face of the earth.” Greater than Noah. Greater than Abraham. Greater than Joshua. Greater than Ruth. Greater than David. Greater than Solomon. Greater than Esther. Despite not entering the Promised Land, not being Priest, not being King, Moses was more devout “than anyone else on the face of the earth.”

The reason Moses was greater, according to Zornberg, is that Moses brought to the people of Israel and to the human race the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the scriptures on which the Sermon on the Mount would centuries later be modeled by Jesus. *Humble and devout, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.*

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When Moses passes the priestly role and garment to his brother Aaron, among the instructions God gives Moses is this:

You shall speak to all who have *ability*, [all] whom I have endowed with *skill*...¹⁶

“All who have ability” literally means “all [who are] wise of heart.”¹⁷ While in this instance God is describing people who have skill in making priestly vestments for Aaron, in a larger sense God is describing Moses’ role of providing the Torah – the teachings of God’s holy will – to everyone who has the ability to *hear* them, to *receive* them, to *use* them with wisdom and skill in their life in the world. The Torah is given to all who have *the ability to do the right thing at the right time in the right way*. That is the purpose of God’s teaching. The Torah. The Ten Commandments. The Sermon on the Mount. *Right thing. Right time. Right way. Choice and wisdom.*

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In Psalm 119, verse 92, the psalmist says:

If your law had not been my delight
[the source of my playfulness],
I would have perished in my misery.

While in our translation, it is the *psalmist* who speaks these words to God, Zornberg points out that some Jewish scholars over the centuries have interpreted these words to be spoken *by God to Moses*.¹⁸ In this line of thinking, God is saying to Moses:

If your Torah had not been my play,
I should have perished in my poverty.

If it were not for the teaching
I have given you,
I would have lost my world.

In this line of interpretation, Moses is called “the most humble and devout person in the world,” because, no matter what is going on in his life or in the life of God’s people, he has served the teaching of God above all else. He has kept the Torah alive through an organic relationship to it, involving joy, creativity, and even

¹⁶ Exodus 28:3.

¹⁷ Exodus 28:3n in *HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books With Concordance* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

¹⁸ Zornberg 114-120.

playfulness. By keeping the scriptures alive, Moses has spared God from dying of a broken heart. *“If your Torah had not been my play, I should have perished in my poverty.”*

III.

Transferring this experience to the Sermon on the Mount, I believe it is fair to say that we who seek to keep alive the teachings of Jesus Christ inspired by the teachings of Moses – with joy, with creativity, even with playfulness in our world – as unplayful as our world can be – serve not only to mend *our* hearts, but to mend the *heart of God* as well. By seeking to understand and embody divine teaching – the Ten Commandments, the Torah, the Sermon on the Mount – we keep God’s holy heart from breaking, and thereby extend God’s life in the world, and by implication, our lives as well. As playful, organic, and creative as keeping alive the teachings of Jesus turns out to be, it is not an overstatement to say that the fate of the world – and God’s fate – may depend on it.

*If your Sermon had not been the source of my play,
I would have perished in my poverty.*

*The right thing
At the right time
In the right way.*

*We can do it
And
God can live to see another day.*

Amen.

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