

7th Sunday of Ordinary Time
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“Be as... God is”

This week, we continue to reflect on the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus lays out the foundations of his vision of God’s Reign come on earth.

Again, I think, it’s worth our remembering that Jesus’s audience on that hillside were peasants living under imperial oppression made worse by the collusion of their own religious leaders... Their hopes for liberation had for generations been set on an ancient promise of a coming Messiah/King who would free them from captivity... and restore justice into their world.

Now Jesus was telling them the Kingdom of God – was in fact at hand... was in fact, in their hands! In the very ways they thought and interacted with one another...

As we began to see last week, Jesus is calling disciples – then and now – to a new way living in community – a way which is none-the-less firmly rooted in *fidelity* to and fulfillment of the ancient Law & the promises — NOT rooted in legalism but in an ethic of integrity, truth and compassion-in-community:

To live as God’s bless-ed people:

- Jesus’ teaches first that yes, we must never kill another; AND so we must attend to extinguishing the anger, resentment, hostility and structures of inequality that give rise to murder and are murderous in effect whether intended or not;
- Second, he teaches that in *all* interpersonal relationships – especially those which are most intimate and vulnerable – we must recognize and honor the full dignity of the other and behave responsibly with respect for their well-being;
- Third, he teaches that our behavior toward God and one another must always be rooted in the highest possible of trustworthiness and integrity – demonstrated consistently in *deed as well as word*.

In today’s Gospel we hear two more teachings – key to Jesus’s vision. Again with the formula: “You have heard... **but I** tell you,” Jesus gets at the *intention* – rather than the letter – of the original law.

In citing “an eye for an eye,” Jesus is quoting the “law of retaliation” from Leviticus, which despite how it sounds to us today – **as a legal principle** – was a very significant advance in putting limits on acts of retribution, so as to curtail cycles of vengeance. It is aimed at justice, and, ensuring that penalties were not arbitrary or punishments disproportionate. So that, for example, a wronged individual, was not justified in wiping out the entire family of a perpetrator who may have killed some sheep from their flock ...

I sincerely trust, that we do all know, that in teaching – what is translated here as “offer no resistance” – Jesus is NOT advising his disciples to let evildoers freely abuse them. The point is better translated and understood as “do not retaliate *violently* against an evil doer.” Jesus has an alternative strategy for dealing with evil. His objective – as our Fr. Andy always reminds us – is to overcome evil with good. His goal was to overcome retaliatory vengeance, by causing those in power to confront the heart of their behavior. This is the core of non-violent resistance. And certainly a teaching our contemporary world is quite literally dying to embrace...

As opposed to just rolling under to abuse, Jesus’ disciples are to respond to an offense with an *action that confronts the offender nonviolently* --- thus breaking the cycle of violence and opening up new possibilities for reconciliation.

Jesus gives us **four** concrete examples: the **first** involves a backhanded slap intended to humiliate. As some of us know, in the culture of the time, only the right hand would be used to strike another. Turning the other cheek would be a provocative response robbing the aggressor of the power to shame. Instead, the shame falls on the perpetrator.

The **second** example concerning a debtor – presumably at rock bottom – who stands naked in court after handing over not only the outer cloak demanded as collateral but also their shirt/undergarment – is shocking... and places shame on the creditor for lack of decency... highlighting the fact that demanding the outer cloak in the first place would have left the creditor without the covering used to protect from the cold of night.

The **third** instance involves a Roman soldier who has obliged a local person to carry his heavy military pack to the next mile marker on the road. This was perfectly legal *AND* particularly humiliating to the occupied population. SO: For the civilian to offer *without anger or sense of humiliation*, to ***continue carrying*** the military gear for another mile would have totally confounded the soldier, and over-turned his relationship to this “inferior” civilian. By refusing to be humiliated and going beyond the letter of the law, the civilian essentially *subverts* the situation, creating a dilemma for the soldier who would face punishment for exacting service for *excessive* distances. Sort of calling the whole system into question... ..

The **fourth** example is aimed at a person with some amount of economic resources; and quite simply says that a person of means approached by a “beggar” should give willingly, and if asked for a loan, oblige without demanding repayment with interest!

In each of these cases, nonviolent and generous responses undermine and defuse hostility and open possibilities for new – more human – ways of *relating*.

And Jesus goes further in this direction, when he says:

“You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor — but hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, *love your enemies and pray for your persecutors*. This will prove that you are children of God.”

Actually, nowhere in Scripture is there a command to hate the enemy... the question really was – and is – whether one was *obliged to act lovingly toward those outside the covenant community... particularly the oppressors*. Jesus’s answer is clearly affirmative. Disciples are to set *no boundaries* on love ... no discrimination... no insiders and outsiders ... no haves and have nots ... no “we” and “they.”

This section of the Gospel concludes with the point that, in the end, it is ***THIS*** that will prove that one is a child of God. If we can wrap our minds and actions around the fact that *God makes the sun to rise on bad and good alike; and God’s rain falls on the just and the unjust*. This is the type of discipleship Jesus desires from his followers. Jesus’ teaching stems from a deep conviction that since God is perfect, so should the followers of God be. ***Just as God provides good things (i.e., “rain”) for the just and the unjust, so must God’s followers treat all others (whether in our view: “good” or “evil”) with consistent love. Getting our “self” out of the way and caring for the other – despite the other’s actions – sums up the call to discipleship.*** Again, we know this is not an invitation to tolerate evil... but a path toward peacemaking.

The call to be perfect as God is perfect is not a call to what we typically might think of as some kind of moral purity ... nor is it beyond our capacity as humans. The word translated here as “perfect,” actually refers to *wholeness, completeness, inclusion and fullness*... just as God sets no bounds on divine love, we are to embrace the radical biblical call to welcome ALL into our care and communities. It is this, our first Reading from Leviticus reminds us, that our all loving God — originally, ...at the time of Moses, ...at the time of Jesus, ...right now and *always* wishes the ‘whole Community to know’ ...

And it is **toward** such wholeness that we continue to be called as Jesus’ disciples – as a faith community as we enter our Lenten Season on 2023. To continue building the beatitudinal community here and now. AND: It is to this end, that our Pastoral Council has committed the next weeks leading to Easter and Pentecost, to undertaking a **Parish** Synodal Process... a process of – *together*, assessing what God has done and is doing within and among *us* as individuals and as a Parish; consulting the many voices and experiences that make us **All Saints**, and taking time to listen deeply to one another and the Spirit. Discerning, sharing, articulating; and then celebrating our shared vision for continuing to build God’s just, compassionate and inclusive Kingdom here on the southeast side of Syracuse... and wherever else the Spirit moves us!

Amen!