

5:38-48

Ted Wardlaw is the former pastor of our Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and now serves as president of Austin Presbyterian Seminary. He's just a few years older than I and we shared some of the same professors at Union Seminary in Richmond, VA.

Ted remembers his first year at Union. He believed he had a call to ministry but when he encountered studying Hebrew, he began to wonder! He talked to some fellow students, but they were of no real help. So he went to see John Leith, professor of theology, and told him of his crisis of faith. Leith, in his understanding, pastoral manner replied: *"In everyone's life, there is an SOB. And right now, that SOB is you. Now quit your navel-gazing, quit your belly-aching, quit whining, quit being such a baby, and get to the li-brary; eat well, exercise, and get to work!"* Wardlaw went to the library and got to work.

John Leith's words were a kick in the pants and a wake-up call to reality. We need to hear Jesus' words as the same thing. If we don't, we're not hearing him. I've said in the two previous sermons, Jesus' teaching here is not just mere morality. It's not even about a better morality. It's about a New Reality--the kingdom of God--which Jesus has brought into our world. And He calls us to be a part of it by following him, learning to be human again from him, and doing what he says. It's about taking seriously our creation and redemption by Jesus as those made and renewed in God's image. It's about an active, committed life. It's about carrying out Jesus' commands toward others and the world. Too many people think the religious life is primarily about

being right with God and being morally good. Well, so did the Pharisees with whom Jesus sparred over and over. Jesus taught something else. He taught a way of living that was much more than that--a righteous way of living that surpassed the righteousness of the Pharisees (Mt 5:17). Indeed, as today's passage concludes, he commanded, "*Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect,*" (5:48). And He meant it. Yes, he meant it.

Every one of Jesus' Beatitudes was either a shock or a puzzlement or both to his listeners. So were these Six Antitheses we've been considering. Today we consider the final two. And we need to be clear on their meaning. Jesus begins, "*You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,'*" (vs.38). That principle of justice is found three times in the Law (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Dt 19:21). Basically, it's a law that limits retaliation. Punishment shall be equal to the crime---not greater. But against this well-established law, Jesus countered, "*But I say unto you: don't use violence to resist evil!*" This is the better rendering of these words rather than the misleading, "*Do not resist an evildoer,*" (NRSV, NIV). Clearly, Jesus didn't mean that, teach that, or do that. He repeatedly resisted the evil of the Pharisees, Sadducees, those who were greedy, and the Devil, too! The apostle Paul echoes Jesus' teaching correctly when he says, "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Beloved, never avenge yourselves...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,*" (Rom 12:17,19,21). And in another place, "*See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all,*" (1 Thes 5:15; also 1 Pet 2:21-23).

What Jesus is addressing here is revengeful retaliation against others. This fits the Golden Rule, "*Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,*" (Mt 7:12).

Hear Jesus again: *“Don’t use violence to resist evil.”* Now while there are some implications of this teaching to war, the role of police and the military, defense of self and others in a crime, Jesus is addressing common, personal interactions with people. He follows his command with examples that every one of his fellow Jews would understand.

In Jesus’ day, Roman soldiers strutted arrogantly around Israel. The Jewish provinces were Roman-occupied territory. If a soldier decided he needed a Jew’s services, resistance was futile. The Jew better be quick to fetch water and strong enough to carry a load. If he could or did not perform the command to the soldier’s liking, a backhand slap to the face was common. Notice Jesus makes reference to the “right” cheek here. The detail is important because it indicates that the first strike or slap would come to the right cheek. In other words, it was a backhand slap, not a punch in the face that would typically hit the left side of the face. In that society, Roman soldiers back-handed their “subjects” to make a point--Jews were inferior class. Roman ruling power never thought twice about the acceptability of treating a lesser persons with less respect, and the slap with the back of the hand was exactly that. It was an insult to a Jew’s honor, the way you would slap a slave, saying “you cur,” “you dog,” “you have no honor.” This is the kind of situation Jesus is speaking to. Now what is the meaning of Jesus’ command in response?

When Jesus tells his fellow Jews to expose the left cheek, he is calling on his countrymen to what is in reality “peaceful subversion.” Clearly Jesus does not want them to retaliate in hateful anger, nor does he want them to shrink back in some false meek-ness. He wants them to force the Roman soldiers to hit them like equals. It asks

the person struck to courageously stand up by offering the left side of the face, say, *“If you are going to strike me, you will at least strike me as an equal, not an inferior!”*

Jesus wants the aggressor to have to stop and think about how they are treating another human being. It may not work. It just may get you another hit. That is true. That is the risk.

But it may also surprise the aggressor into realizing you have an unexpected kind of dignity after all--like the followers of Mahatma Gandhi who did not retaliate in kind to their British overlords. Or like the followers of Martin Luther King, Jr, who did not violently retaliate against the segregationist racists. They marched nonviolently in the face of rocks, curses, insults, police dogs, fire hoses, and police brutality. This shocked the world into a new kind of awareness of the injustice, and new kind of respect for the self-discipline of the non-violent protest. It's a bold move. It's a positive action intended to shame the aggressor. It's meant to play on his conscience. It's meant to at least raise in his mind his own injustice, and the way he is treating another human being as inferior.

It's the same motivation with *“giving up the cloak”* and *“going the extra mile.”* In both of those cases, the law protected the one being forced to give up one's outer garment--the cloak--but someone might sue you for your undershirt--or tunic--because you owed them some money and couldn't pay. Jesus says, *“OK, you're in court, being sued for your shirt. Go ahead, give it to them, and your outer cloak, too. Then stand their naked before the judge!”* That would be enormously embarrassing for the court, and show up the plaintiff's greed for the reality it is. It's a bold, active, and creative way of dealing with an injustice.

Similarly, “*go an extra mile.*” Roman soldiers occupying Judea had the right to demand that a Jew carry his pack one mile. Naturally, Jews resented it. It was unjust and humiliating. What does Jesus say to do? If we combine Jesus’ teaching here on the “second mile” with his earlier teaching about being “peacemakers” (Mt 5:9) and “making peace” (5:25), we can see Jesus’ logic. Saying “go the second mile,” could imply to show up the soldier for his injustice. But there is something more, too. There may be opportunity to engage the soldier in conversation, find some kindness, discover some common humanity, make a friend, and make peace. This would be most unexpected. And Roman soldiers might learn from Jews what it felt like to live under occupation. A Jew could learn what it was like to be resented night and day by people around you. A Jew might learn about a Roman’s family, how it felt to be living far away from home. You can imagine a Roman soldier asking a Jew--a Jesus follower--why are you doing this, and learning what it meant to be a follower of this Jesus, and about discipleship and his unusual attitude toward “enemies.” And later perhaps, learning even more about this man who died on a Roman cross, and about whom even a Roman called the “son of God.”

The fourth instruction about “giving to him who asks” has to do with giving to genuine need, and addressing it with compassion and generosity--just as we recognize legitimate need by groups such as the Samaritans, Red Cross, Heifer International, Wounded Warrior, and many others. In all these instances, Jesus is not saying, “*Don’t live with injustice, don’t just comply--much less be!--part of oppression, and just live powerlessly.*” Rather, just as he himself was, he calls on us his followers to be different--to in so far as one can, take one’s situation in hand with justice and kindness,

not retaliation and resentment Jesus calls for action--a transforming initiative--that includes an element of surprise and meekness--something that offers a correction to ongoing hostility, domination, exclusion or injustice that is so typical and we consider "normal."

In our interactions with others--be they family, friends, or strangers--we are to look for opportunity of a kingdom break-through, a reconciliation, a witness to the Kingdom Reality of Jesus. This is the opposite of beating my enemy, besting my opponent, and having my way. Nor Jesus doesn't want his followers to act in the world--or to try to change the world even "in Jesus' name"--with the world's own ways. Many Christians want to deal with aggression in the same manner as everyone else. And since, we think, we are "right," God will bless it and make it right. But if you meet aggression with aggression and blow for blow, the cycle of vengeance will never end. Violence begets violence until someone or some people are strong enough to rise above it. Frankly, Jesus' wants something else. Frankly, he commands something else. Jesus here gives a strategy for kingdom life, and provides tactics to go with it.

The sixth Antithesis is "*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy!' But I tell you: love your enemies! Pray for people who persecute you!*" (5:43-44). Now, while there is indeed the law in the Old Testament, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself,*" (Lev 19:18), there was no law, "*You shall hate your enemy.*" People don't seem to need a law for that. It comes rather naturally. But in Jesus' day, it was a well-known saying (actually is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran in Jesus' time). Jesus clearly jettisons such teaching. If we love only those

who love us, we see only an in-group perspective--ours. We cannot understand them, nor they us. Coupled with religion, such thinking and feeling only adds to blame, hatred, slander, and violence.

So much of Jesus' teaching condemns and obliterates our ways of justifying ourselves before God and excluding and condemning others with whom we are different, and call them enemies. The Pharisees and teachers of the law--as well as the average Jewish person--had whole lists of people considered unacceptable to God--be they differentiated by race, gender, politics, morality, religion, and outward practices. But over and over in the Gospels, we see Jesus never abiding by such human distinctions. Jesus makes a point of smashing such attitudes and prejudices. The question many Jews discussed was "*Who is excluded from being my neighbor?*" (Lk 10:29). And Jesus told parables like the Good Samaritan, and he forgave people their sins, and healed all sorts of diseases--saying by such actions, no one is unloved by God, no one is beyond mercy, no one is "not neighbor." So, act likewise.

This did not mean one affirms everything our "enemies" do. Jesus didn't do that either. But it does mean our enemies can become our friends, and they have valid needs, too. Jesus teaches our attitudes toward others--and all are neighbors, if we get what He's saying--is to be as God himself, "*who makes his sun rise on the bad and good alike, and sends rain on both the upright and on the unjust.*" If that's the way God is, Jesus says, if we are his children, then, we, too, reflect the way of our Father. That's what being "*a child of*" means. You act like your Father. There is a family resemblance. And when we do, Jesus says, we are "perfect."

Now that word perfect can be a bit misleading. The word here (*teleios*, akin to

*telos*--“goal”) can be “complete” “mature,” “finished,” as well as “perfect.” For Jesus’ teaching here has a goal. It’s the kingdom of God on earth and our participation in it and growth into the likeness of Jesus himself. To live like Jesus means to reflect Him who is complete himself, God our Father. Isn’t that what Jesus says, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven,*” (vss. 44-45). If you really know God’s complete love you will demonstrate to others that you know such complete love.

In Luke 6:32-36, Jesus says essentially the same thing. Here is perfection--that God is merciful, compassionate, kind to all without distinction: “*Love your enemies and do good, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*” We--the church--has too long preached that salvation was mainly about going to heaven. If we hear Jesus, salvation is learning to live like God. Jesus shows us the way--shows us the perfect way of the perfect One.

Finally, Jesus is telling us here in this command, “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,*” we are active witnesses for the kingdom which is coming into completion here, just as we pray for it--“*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth*”--on earth, and in us, and forever, when God’s kingdom will be complete, when we are complete in his love, when all are reconciled with all, and “*God is over all, through all, and in all,*” (Eph 4:6).

During Christmas 1957, while he was in jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a sermon called: “*Loving Your Enemies*”: “*To our most bitter opponents we say: ‘We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We*



*shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you...Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still continue to love you...beat us and leave us half-dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory.'"* You see, strategy and tactics--and for the good of all.

Friends, the Sermon on the Mount isn't just about us. If it was, we might admire it for a fine bit of idealism, which I am afraid many Christians do treat it. We must get it's about Jesus himself first. This was the pattern--the blueprint--for his own life. This is the way to show what God is really like. It is the pattern Jesus himself followed exactly. As this Gospel makes clear, by Jesus we encounter "Emmanuel, the God-with-us" person (Mt 1:23). The Sermon on the Mount is not primarily about how to behave. It's about how to discover the living God in the living, loving, dying, and rising Jesus.

Remember the story some weeks back "*about a NYC Bowery wino named Joe who was about as bad as you could be. But he was converted at a mission service one night, and his life changed immediately and dramatically for the better. He worked for the mission untiringly, caring for some of the least and worst in the city. He cleaned up drunks, fed them, mopped up their messes, swabbed out the bathrooms, and cared in every way possible he could. At a preaching meeting some months later, another wino stumbled down the aisle, repenting, crying out, "O God, make me like Joe!"*" After

*several of these pleas, the mission chaplain leaned over and whispered to the man, “I think you mean to say, ‘make me like Jesus,’ don’t you? ‘Jesus’ the man blinked uncomprehendingly. Looking back at the chaplain, he said, “Is he like Joe?” (Cited by Lee Wyatt, *The Incredible Shrinking Gospel*, p. 117).*

Would that the world--even just that little part around each of us--would look at the church--the church that says it follows Jesus--and say, no see, something like that! For our outward matters. Amen.