

Loving when it is “Impossible” to Love

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 17, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Leviticus 19:18 (NRSV)

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Deuteronomy 23:3-6 (NRSV)

³No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, ⁴because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. ⁵(Yet the LORD your God refused to heed Balaam; the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you.) ⁶You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.

Matthew 5:43-48 (NRSV)

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This is the third in a five-week series on the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we consider Jesus’ teaching that we are to love our enemies.

Who is my neighbor?

As was evident in the Beatitudes, Matthew carefully constructed the Sermon on the Mount. Today’s passage is taken from a long section of antitheses in chapter 5. All of them work like this: Jesus says “you have it heard it said [X], but I say to you [Y].” The last of these antitheses (Matt 5:43-48) brings us right to the heart of Jesus’ teachings – love of neighbor. Later in his ministry, Jesus would be asked “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus replied, “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength . . . and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus’ questioner then asked the right follow-up question: “And who is my neighbor?” (see Luke 10:25-37)

A critical issue for the Jews had always been identifying those persons who were among God’s people. To put this another way, God had made a covenant with his people – so the obvious question was: who are the people of the covenant? When the Jews got this right, they understood that this was not a matter of birth. After all, Ruth was not

Perfect? Yikes!

If John Wesley had a “life verse” it would seem to have been Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Yet, this verse seems so unrealistic to us – how can we be perfect!?! As with so much else in Jesus’ sermon, we end up setting this verse aside as part of Jesus’ “impossible ideal.” But it is not, and a little knowledge of Matthew’s Greek will help.

In the Greek, the word we translate “perfect” is *teleios*. For Plato, it conveyed absolute intrinsic goodness. For the ancient Stoics, the person who is *teleios* is the one who possesses all virtues. In the New Testament, there is an ethical dimension to *teleios*, but there is more. *Teleios* is used to convey wholeness and completeness as God is whole and complete – maturity as God is mature.

Many high-level athletes practice visualization as a training tool. For example, a champion diver might visualize, over and over, a perfect dive – in the expectation that visualizing the goal will help her achieve it. Clearly, a champion diver is not going to see a perfect dive as an impossible ideal! Here, Jesus points us toward our goal – completeness and wholeness such that we fully reflect the image of God, that we become truly Christ-like. We need to embrace the goal, not dismiss it.

born a Jew and she was the great-grandmother of David! The people of the covenant were those who worshiped the LORD God and bound themselves to his law – to the covenant. In simple and visible terms, God’s people were those who avoided pork and kept the Sabbath!

In Leviticus 19:18, “neighbor” was limited to those within God’s community. Though the Jews were never commanded to hate their enemies, it is a reasonable inference from passages like Deuteronomy 23:3-6. The Ammonites and Moabites (Ruth was a Moabite!) were to be excluded from the assembly – from God’s people. They were to be seen as outside the ‘neighborhood.’

But of course, Jesus obliterated this understanding of neighbor! When asked, “Who is my neighbor,” he replied with the parable about a good neighbor from Samaria. The hero, the one rendering aid in the parable, was a despised Samaritan. This powerful parable makes clear that everyone is to be our neighbor – even those we might hate and despise and call an enemy.

Love my enemy??!!

Jesus’ teachings about loving enemies would have hit his disciples hard. The Jews hated their Roman oppressors. Revolutionary movements of one sort or another had sprung up for decades, especially in Galilee. In 4BC, 2000 Galileans rebels had been crucified by the Romans! Surely, his disciples would have thought that Jesus was “piling on” when he referred to the despised tax-collectors, who, though Jewish, were seen as traitorous Roman lackeys.

Love

“Love your enemies.” What do we mean by “love”? In most instances, when speaking of Christian love, NT writers used the Greek word *agape*. They didn’t invent the word and, used out of context, the Greek word wouldn’t convey the Christian meaning of love.

Jesus pointed his disciples toward a love that is self-giving and sacrificial. It is concrete and not abstract. It is a love that is grounded in action. When Jesus says “love your enemies,” he is not speaking of a feeling or a sentiment. After all, how would you really command someone to feel a certain way. This love is related to OT notions of “covenant love” or “steadfast love.” God’s love for his people was expressed not in sentiment, but his actions, like saving them from slavery in Egypt.

In the concrete world of Jesus’ disciples, “love your enemies” meant love the hated Roman oppressors. It meant that if a Roman soldier asked you to carry his equipment one mile (as he was legally entitled to do), then carry it two (Matt 5:41)!

There is a nuance here that we ought to try to hear. Jesus isn’t speaking abstractly, as if to say “love everyone, even your enemies.” Rather, Jesus puts it point-blank: “love your enemies.” In its absoluteness, Jesus’ command had no precedent in Judaism or the world of the Gentiles.¹

What is Jesus’ explanation for such a bold teaching? This is not some humanitarian ideal nor does he teach it as a means to an end. Rather, we are to love our enemies because loving impartially, loving the just and the unjust, is God’s nature and we are made in God’s image. This is what Jesus means when he says that God makes it rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (v. 45). Loving our enemies is what sets apart the children of God – this is what we are called to do. Not because God arbitrarily commands it, but because it springs from the very best part of who we are. When Jesus speaks of reward, we shouldn’t read it as some sort of carrot for doing the right thing. Rather, talk of “reward” is part of Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News, of the coming of the kingdom of God. The Good News is the basis for the radical demands that Jesus makes on his disciples – and on us!

The children of the Father (v. 45), the children of the kingdom, are to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light to the world.” Could we be a brighter light than when we love our enemies? Could there be stronger witness to the reality of God’s kingdom than Mable Mobley’s² willingness to care for – and to love – the children of her son’s murderers.

¹from Eugene Boring’s commentary on Matthew in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1995.

²from my sermon on August 3. In 1955, Mable’s son was murdered by two white racists in Money, Mississippi. If you aren’t familiar with the story of Mable Mobley and her son, you can find the sermon text at www.standrewcccl.org.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Leviticus 19:11-18 Instructions about “your people,” “your kin,” and “your neighbor”</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 10:25-37 Jesus is questioned and replies with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 4:23 – 7:28 The entire Sermon on the Mount. Please read it in one sitting. We’ll do this once a week during this series!</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Peter 2:9-17 Peter instructs the Christians to “honor the emperor” (v. 17)!! Is this merely practical advice for avoiding persecution – or is it more?</p>
<p>Day 5 1 John 4:7-21 If you asked Jesus who John is referring to as “one another,” how do you think he would reply?</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Bible Academy registration is now available on-line!

Bible Academy classes begin the week of September 15. You can pick up information about the classes and a registration form at the information counter in the Narthex. This will also be mailed out in the newsletter you'll receive in early September.

To register and for info go to www.standrewccl.org or www.standrewumc.org

Scott Engle's new SS class, *Something More*, is at 9:30!!

We've begun a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class is led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies, and is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is plenty of time for questions and answers.

We meet (for now!) in Room 4 of Piro Hall on the Garden Level of the new sanctuary.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Could Jesus set out a more radical expression of the Christian life than "love your enemies"? Even if we could work up loving feelings for an enemy, that is not what Jesus is talking about. It is really about what we *do*. Jesus seems to go beyond loving our enemies when he says "Do not resist an evildoer" (Matt 5:39). How do we reconcile all this with the obvious evil that infects so much of the world and our lives? Would Jesus really have us turn a blind eye to the Holocaust or to the killing fields of Cambodia or to the mass graves in Iraq? What might he mean? What do such teachings say to us about our everyday lives?
2. In a 1944 letter from his Nazi prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about Matt 5:48, contrasting the completeness/wholeness/perfection of v. 48 with the "double-minded" person of James 1:8. Bonhoeffer wrote "he [the Christian] cannot split up his life or dismember it, and the common denominator must be sought both in thought and in a personal and integrated attitude to life . . . We can never achieve this 'wholeness' simply by ourselves, but only together with others." Discuss what Bonhoeffer wrote. What is the common denominator of the Christian life? What characterizes an integrated life? Why would we need others to achieve it? Where do we begin?