

Matthew 5, Be Perfect, Love Enemies, Feb. 2017

“Be ye perfect.” Catchy ending to our lesson, huh? Are you perfect? Are you practically perfect, like Lyle Northey usually is? Are you a perfectionist, one who seeks perfection? While I have a long list of personal flaws and failings, I learned when I got married nearly 28 years ago now, that I am *not* a perfectionist. I learned this in contrast to my husband, who *is*. I initially was puzzled by why it would take Phil twice as long to do something as it took me. Vacuuming the living room; balancing the check book; loading the dishwasher. I would often become quite irritated. A few months of observation led me to understand why this was. When I vacuum, I vacuum around the chairs; Phil moves them and vacuums underneath. When I balanced the check book, I just tried to get close enough; Phil balanced it to the penny. When I loaded the dishwasher, I just put the dishes in there; Phil loaded it ‘properly’, just so. Perfectionism can be a difficult personal quality; my husband, for example, agonizes over sermon writing, staring at the blank page while trying to formulate the perfect sentence, and then he wings it anyways when he actually preaches. But it’s a lot of stress—for him, and sometimes for me, too. Of course, there’s an upside to perfectionism, as well; and that’s knowing that someone is doing something very well, very thoroughly, and very accurately. I do most of the vacuuming for sure, but the fact that when Phil vacuums he does such a good job of it gives me permission to not worry so much about how thorough a job *I* do. And I know that we know precisely where stand financially, *and* that our dishes are well washed. I don’t know if every marriage has one perfectionist or one not; presumably both spouses could be perfectionists or neither might be, but I bet you could all identify which you are. Perfectionism is a trait that makes itself evident fairly quickly. *And* a trait we generally approach with at least a little caution, knowing that it involves a tendency towards taking one’s self quite seriously and setting

the bar awfully high. As we discussed perfection at our text study this past week, the Methodist pastor present commented that in their ordination ritual, the Bishop asked each pastoral candidate: “Will you strive to grow in perfection?” And you need to answer, “yes”! I grew up Methodist, but I sure felt grateful that I became a Lutheran during college when I heard that! I long ago gave up trying to attain perfection; I don’t think it’s possible or even helpful. And yet, here’s Jesus ending this portion of our text by saying, “Be ye perfect.”

Jesus has been a roll the last four weeks in Matthew’s Gospel, and we have been rolling along with him. We’ve been examining portions of his “Sermon on the Mount”. He began nicely, four weeks ago, with the ‘Blessed ares”, the Beatitudes, which we like. The next week, he told us we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, which sat pretty well with us. Things took an abrupt downturn last Sunday when Jesus began to expand upon Old Testament laws involving murder, adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths. For each topic, he said, “You have heard”, “but I say to you”. And in each instance, instead of nullifying the earlier law, he made it harder, by examining the intent and spirit of the law, rather than merely the letter of the law. His words on divorce are particularly difficult and they are probably the least favorite passage for any preacher to tackle, including me.

But, we got through last week without anyone actually pelting me with tomatoes, possibly because you didn’t know in advance to bring them. And just when all of us are hoping for a little relief this morning, we instead get more of the same. Jesus is at it again! “You have heard”, “but I say to you”....this time in relation to two more things that hit us where we live: our desire for vengeance or retaliation; and loving our enemies. Jesus is opposed to the former and supports the latter; he suggests we give up retaliatory or vengeful behavior, *and* that we practice loving our enemies. He just won’t give us a break, will he? Talk about setting the bar

high! And then he ends with that seemingly hopeless verse: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Makes me feel like we all may as well pick up our toys and go home. We just can’t do this. Can we?

First of all, we’re going to begin with the ending, we’re going to examine that last verse, since it’s the real kick in the gut. The Greek word translated “perfect” is *telos*, and it’s one of those words that doesn’t really have an excellent English equivalent. I’m going to quote Seminary President and Pastor David Lose here, because he knows more about this than I do. He writes: “One key observation here: the word we translate “perfect” is actually the Greek word *telos* and implies less a moral perfection than it does reaching one’s intended outcome. The *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of a peach tree is to yield peaches. Which means that we might translate this passage more loosely to mean, “Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be.” He concludes, “Interesting. Read this way, Jesus’ words are less command than promise. God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for you. “

So, this passage is not so much a fruitless nagging at us to do the impossible: reach moral perfection. It is more an encouragement *and* command to us, to move towards that goal of the *person* God created us to be; the *community* that God created us to be. That “telos” is the end point, the goal God has in mind for us, to be who God meant for us to be. I cannot now resist quoting Martin Luther. He started out as a religious perfectionist determined to find a gracious God through his own moral perfection, and then realized it’s not about attaining perfection; it’s about walking the road with God with grace, on the path towards being who God intends you to be. He wrote: “This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health,

but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road.” Right? We are not perfect, but we are walking the road of God’s intention for us. And this is what the road looks like this morning, in light of Jesus’ words: do not retaliate. Love your enemies. That’s some road.

Let’s think on enemies for a while, shall we? There are different levels of perceiving enemies: personal enemies, for a close up example. Enemies of our nation, for a bigger picture example. And some of us are far more likely to perceive enemies than others, rightly or wrongly. And who can say whether our perceptions *are* right or wrong, because there’s certainly a *subjective* component to identifying the enemy. Plus, it’s an ever-shifting landscape. In the Second World War, Germany and Japan were our enemies, but now they seem to be our good allies. I grew up in the 60s and heard about Russia as our enemy, and then it seemed like maybe they were our ally, and right now I can’t figure out what the heck they are or why they keep popping up in our news so often again. So, it may not always be so consistent or clear cut, but, let’s go ahead and try to identify enemies. Let’s think global picture first. Who are America’s enemies? Are Muslims our enemy? Are immigrants our enemy? Are Mexicans our enemy? Are Russians our enemy? Hmm. Let’s think within our nation next. Are Republicans the enemy? Are Democrats the enemy? Are protesters the enemy? Are police the enemy? Are mosques the enemy? Are the migrant workers our enemy? Again---hmmm. So, let me go ahead and say this quite plainly: I do not believe there is any Biblical justification for identifying an entire group of people, based on their faith, ethnicity, or background, as enemies. I *do* believe that hate oriented extremists of any kind or flavor, whether they are neo-Nazis claiming a Christian backing, or ISIS terrorists claiming a Muslim backing—and both claims are equally

false; or pretty much any kind of violent extremist you can mention---I believe such folks are enemies to the intent and plan God has for our world. But such people are *everyone's* enemy, because they threaten the shalom God wills for the world.

Now let's shrink the circle and get personal. Who is *your* enemy? A boss, a coworker, a family member, a former friend or spouse? Who is your enemy? Who wishes you ill, wants to bring you down, who has wronged you? Against whom do you wish revenge? Against whom would you like to retaliate? Who is *your* enemy?

Let me just point out, that for the folks hearing Jesus's words in 1st C. Palestine these questions were not as hard to answer as *we* might find them to be. In general, they lived with less ambiguity in attitude than we do. They knew who their enemies were, and 1st C. Jews had a lot of enemies. Palestine was an occupied country, by the Romans, and there were governing Roman officials and Roman soldiers to keep order, and members of their Roman households, everywhere, just like in any occupation. The Romans were their enemies, and they weren't far away across the world, they were right there in the street with you, often imposing on you to undertake labor or pay taxes that were repugnant to you. Furthermore, Jews had very much an "us versus them" overall world perception. There was the "us" the Jews, and the "them"-everyone else in the world, referred to as Gentiles. Which would include us, by the way, unless you are somehow of Jewish descent. So, for the 1st C. Jews, there were hardly any "us", since Jews were scarce in the bigger picture, and a whole lot of them, the "enemy"---everyone else in the world. We may be experiencing our time and place as being more contentious and hostile than usual, but the Jews of Jesus' day lived far more intensely with daily confrontations with

“the enemy” than most of us ever have. It is to *them* that Jesus speaks these oh-so-challenging words about forgoing retaliation and vengeance and instead finding a way to love their enemy.

What does it *mean* to love your enemy? Well, it can't mean sending them a box of Valentine's chocolates this last week and feeling warm and fuzzy, because the Scriptures have little interest in romantic or even warm, fuzzy love, truth be told. It also can't mean becoming a doormat to oppressors or allowing injustice to pass unchallenged, because God is fervent in opposition to oppression and injustice. So, what *does* it mean? I always love the line from Fiddler on the Roof, where the sorely oppressed Jewish Russian peasants who feared and hated the Russian Tsar ask their elderly Rabbi: “Is there a blessing for the tsar?” And the wily Rabbi replies, “May God bless and keep the tsar...far away from us!” Not such a bad answer, is it?

So, if we are praying for the rulers of groups or nations that seem hostile to us, we aren't praying that God will bless efforts of oppression; we are praying for God's will to be done, for justice to be accomplished, either through that leader or in spite of that leader. In other words, praying for someone we regard with enmity doesn't necessarily indicate an endorsement of all their policies, actions or beliefs, but rather it's an endorsement that God cares about them and us, that God is active in this world, and that God's will is always for the common good, however that may be accomplished in any particular case.

What about loving enemies on a more personal level? Again, we're not talking about warm fuzzy feelings here. I've found a Celtic Christian tradition to be helpful in this situation. They encourage prayer for one's self; one's adversary, and “the space between us.” Maybe that space needs to widen or to narrow, but we are leaving it in God's hands then and looking to God to be in the mix of moving us forward from where we are at present. We forgo retaliation in

exchange for prayer. And while vengeance or retaliation have immense appeal to our human nature, they generally do not promote future wellbeing or good relations for most of those involved. Tomorrow is President's Day, when we honor two of our greatest leaders, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Think of the words of Lincoln's 2nd Inaugural Address as the Civil War was coming soon to an end, how he perceived that the nation needed healing and reconciliation rather than the punishing of the confederacy by the union. "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Sounds Biblical, doesn't it? Because Lincoln was a deeply spiritual man who understood that God seeks justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation, whenever possible, rather than the perpetuation of violence, vengeance, and hatred.

Today's lesson reminds us that being a follower of Jesus is not easy; God does not set the bar low. We are walking that road with our gracious Lord towards who God intends us to be, and it's not always an easy road. We don't earn our salvation or win God's love by our efforts on this planet; those are already ours through Christ. This isn't about heavenly brownie points. *But*, our behavior should make evident to others that we worship, love, and follow a God who is loving, just, and holy. Our text this morning presents us with a challenge: how do we forgo retaliation? How do we love our enemies? How do we live faithfully in a broken and blessed world? Amen.