

“What the Creator Desires”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational UCC, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Isaiah 2: 2-4; Matthew 5: 17-48

To say there is a lot to “chew” on in this scripture would be an understatement. Instructions about what to do when someone strikes you, makes you carry their pack, sues for divorce, and “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” I left out conversations about “an eye for an eye” and murder and whether or not Jesus has come to uphold or abolish the law. And those issues are just the surface issues we see when we read this scripture from Matthew’s Gospel. You can imagine that it gets interpreted many different ways, often to the benefit of the interpreter. I knew a person once who said that if his ex-wife got remarried, she had committed adultery. He got remarried before she did. No mention of that scripture when he remarried. Now trust me, I don’t believe that Jesus was saying all divorces are wrong. In fact, I’m grateful my parents divorced as the alternative would have been a nightmare. Does that mean I recommend divorce in all cases? No. And that leads me to where Jesus is heading in this complicated scripture.

Brian McLaren in our chapter for this week from his book *We Make the Road by Walking* (Chapter 28) says plainly that Jesus was proposing a third way: neither compliant nor non-compliant, which is usually all we ever know. I either go along to get along, or I fight the system. What Jesus is trying to get us to think about is a third way, a deeper way, a way that may be harder, but might be more faithful. But before we get to all of that, I'd like to tackle the issue of perfection first.

Often, we take the final scripture in this passage, "Be perfect just as your Father is perfect" a little too literally. In fact, perfection is simply not in the cards for us. I had a friend once who said, "It seemed like a good thing to do at the time." Basically, that meant that given all the knowledge, and all the information, and all the experience a person has at a decision point, they make what they think is the best decision. In hindsight, it might end up being exactly the wrong decision, but we need some grace to know that none of us possess 20/20 hindsight going into a problem, and secondly, that we never have all the information that we need. Is Jesus holding us to a standard we can never achieve? Maybe. But here's what I think is a better way to look at it, and it comes from McLaren's book:

Jesus directs his disciples beyond what the tradition requires to what the Creator desires...God's perfection is a compassionate and gracious perfection...better than mere technical compliance to tradition, better than defiance of tradition.

The words I keyed on here were compassionate and gracious. And if you watch Jesus, he is almost always both of those things. And where it seems that he is not, deeper study might reveal that even in those places, Jesus practices grace and compassion always.

Now that you got the main point, you can either turn this off, or come back with me to figure out how we got to this understanding. McLaren starts out the chapter describing that "anyone present that day would have felt some tension in the air." And we thought we were the first ones! Tension is often in the air when humans are around, especially when emotions are high, and options seem few. I think you'll agree that both ends of the political spectrum cause much tension. Sometimes that's helpful, sometimes not as much. In fact, I listened to a sermon out of New Zealand the other day, in which Aaron Hardy, the preacher, said, "Discomfort is used to flesh out God's will after breaking ours." And that, "Confrontation is the residence of God" ("Knowing the Story of Aotearoa" February 14, 2021). I think there is some real truth there that confrontation often comes when one follows God. Another look at the same issue comes from Richard Rohr

who says that “In order for evil to get away with it, it has to look good.” In other words, confrontation (also could be read as noncompliance) may be necessary. But how and when?

If you’re still following me, as I stated before, there seem often to be only two options in the face of a problem: compliance or non-compliance. Many who heard Jesus that day stuck to the “familiar road of tradition, playing by the rules, leading conservative, conventional, and respectable lives. They were worried that Jesus was too...different, too non-compliant. Others were on a completely different road. Unfettered by tradition, they gladly bent any rule that got in their way. They were worried Jesus wasn’t different and defiant enough. According to Jesus, neither group was on the road to true aliveness” (McLaren 131). What does that mean?

For me, it means that we are called to be creative and non-violent in our response to violence and other aggression. First, I think, that means checking ourselves. “What about this situation makes me angry (upset, confused, frustrated...pick your word)? Leaning into our own anger often reveals that we’re simply angry about the fact that other people want to get to the same place we do, but by another road. Or we’re angry that we must change when we’d much prefer

another to change. Or we're angry that we're inconvenienced. The point is that at the root of physical violence is anger. And Jesus calls us to pre-emptive reconciliation. And this is hard.

Sometimes Jesus is accused of promoting "doormat theology", where people become doormats for violent, aggressive bullies. I believe that to be a misreading of the scriptures, especially this one. You must understand the context for why Jesus said what he did. About divorce, a man could divorce a woman for any reason at any time on a whim and leave her destitute. Jesus says, "Get divorced, but only based on adultery." I have no doubt that Jesus would agree that there are other reasons that divorce is necessary, but people shouldn't just get divorced on a whim where one person holds all the power, money, home and property and the other one is left destitute. Feel free to contact me if you want to talk through this more. This is the toughest of the scriptures to understand in this passage, I think. In fact, I've been working on it for a lifetime.

Second, offering to be hit on the other cheek. This is not Jesus saying that physical abuse is something people should just take. Again, in his context, as McLaren so ably states, "It was not uncommon for a Roman soldier to give one of [the Israelites] a backhand slap – the insulting whap of a superior to an inferior.

When this happened, some would skulk away in humiliation or beg the bully not to hit them again. But that rewarded the oppressor's violence, and it made [the victim] complicit in their own diminishment." Some dreamed of retaliation, but Jesus' prescription was to stand tall and courageously turn the other cheek. In so doing, they would choose "nonviolence, strength, courage and dignity...and they would model a better way of life...rather than mirroring the violent example they were setting."

In each and every other one of the scriptures, the prescription is the same. If someone takes you to court and wants your cloak for money owed to them, give up everything, standing buck naked in the court might provoke a reaction! Now none of us would think of doing this. **And that is exactly the point!**

It takes nothing for violence to be met with violence. Sooner or later, it just leads to everyone killing and maiming each other, or tearing each other apart by skewering one another with harsh words. We diminish ourselves when we meet people with an eye for an eye. A more creative, life-giving, world-altering answer is something other than weak resignation or matching violence with violence. Those two options are the expected responses, and bring about expected responses, but nothing is really changed. Sometimes, maybe oftentimes, we just

replace one bully with another. What the Creator desires is something much more disciplined, courageous, and creative.

Jesus employs his “you have heard it said...but I say...” pattern many times in this story. The last one the most radical example of all. In the words of McLaren, “Tradition always requires love and responsibility toward friends and neighbors, people we like, people like us, people of ‘our kind.’ That is a big step beyond utter selfishness and narcissism. But Jesus says the road was never meant to end there. Love should now be extended farther than before, to outsiders as well as insiders, to *them* as well as *us...*” And wait for it, “even to our enemies.” McLaren then states the obvious that “We may not have walked the road that far yet, but that is God’s intent for us.”

I want to end there, although this scripture could be talked about for days on end. But the point is that God’s intent, the Creator’s desire for us, is that we continue further down the road. We challenge our assumptions, we try new ways to respond to violence, we open ourselves up to love others with a vulnerability that is counter intuitive. God challenges us to love everyone, even our enemies, and this may be the toughest faith journey to take. This Lent, I know a lot of you will “give something up”, and that’s great, but I think God is less concerned with

whether or not you eat chocolate than you might think. But what if this Lent, we gave up violence, in thought, in word, and in deed. What do you think would be harder? Six weeks without chocolate, or six weeks of loving and caring about, and being non-violent towards your enemies. No one is saying be their best friend! But what if the hostility, the glares, the refusal to speak, the contempt, what if those things dropped away for six weeks? It would be a lot easier to achieve world peace, wouldn't it, if we stopped requiring other people to do it, but never once tried to do so ourselves. This would be the hardest Lenten discipline you and I ever took on. To not even think nasty thoughts about that so-and-so down the street? I can't think of a harder task. Giving up violence of every kind sounds impossible!

Only Jesus did that perfectly, or near-perfectly (depending on your reading of a couple scriptures), and we are called to be disciples of his way, aren't we? Following him, even to the point of the cross? We say we would. But the first step is less or no violence toward others. Pretty tall order! We'd better pray:

God of all to me, of all I can and cannot see,
Help me to be an instrument of peace,
To not practice violence of any kind, even for a day, toward anyone or any thing.
May I learn to love as you love.
May I learn the ways of peace that I so long for.

And even if I do it alone, may the world be changed, or at least my corner of it, because I refused to play the violence game.

A game where everyone leaves blind, or dead, or an empty shell.

Help me to be all I have been created to be and may that be true for all I share this world with.

Amen.