

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year [A] 2023 (SND, OSF)

For the past three weeks, we have listened to parts of Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. It starts out nicely with the Beatitudes—Blessed, Happy will you be if you lead this kind of life. That's fine; we look forward to that. Then the second week, he gets a little more direct: Be salt for the earth, be light for the world. Come on, others are depending on you. My Father's goodness must be seen in and through you. Then last week it starts to get uncomfortable—remember? He spoke about murder/anger, adultery/lust, divorce and taking oaths. He bluntly tells us that it is not enough just to avoid the acts, our *attitude*, has to be right as well.

And now, today, we come to the *really* tough part: Turn the other cheek; go the extra mile; love your enemies. Ouch. When we think of non-violence, perhaps the first images that come to mind are the truly impressive stands taken by such people as Mohandas Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela. Like Jesus on the cross, forgiving the soldiers who had put him there, they were willing to lay down their lives in pursuit of justice.

While we may admire these people and others like them, most of us won't be called to emulate them. But that does not mean that there won't be many *ordinary opportunities* in our own lives to turn back anger with a calm response and to refuse to escalate a conflict situation. We cannot miss these opportunities. Our world today is an increasingly angry place—from the political world to the street corner. It seems that we have lost touch with the need for a peaceful response. Anger and revenge are becoming a more and more acceptable way of dealing with problems.

Like the people of Moses' day, who needed to be reminded that “an eye for an eye” was a way of *limiting* revenge that could be taken on someone—it wasn't saying this is what you should do

when someone does this to you—we need strong reminders today that there must be limits to our anger. Otherwise we run the risk of turning into a nation of Jezebels, people who plot and plan and mow down anyone in the path of our greed and our anger and our hatred.

But we who call ourselves Christians have a far greater demand put upon us by the Lord and Savior we follow. He calls us to stop our instinctive animal reactions long before they reach the stage of harming others. And turning the other cheek is not a passive reaction by any means. It requires tremendous strength and self-control. During the civil rights movement of the 1960's, groups of protesters went through intense training to be able to respond nonviolently to any sort of threat. It required an extraordinary amount of control and of belief in the rightness of their cause.

Perhaps we might start with the many small irritations that come up in the course of an ordinary day. The tried and true method of taking a deep breath and counting to 5 usually works. And in these days of instant communication, walking away from the computer before hitting “send” on an angry email is a good idea as well. Avoiding blogs and other media outlets designed to stoke the fires of anger can give us more of a sense of control over our own feelings. None of this means letting people walk all over us. It means taking responsibility for not only our actions, but our *reactions* as well.

Then Jesus says, “Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” Really? Can he be serious? Terrorists? Rapists? Arsonists? Child molesters? Putin? Pray for them?? Abraham Lincoln once said, “The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend.” In her marvelous book, *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin writes of Lincoln's true genius in applying this bit of wisdom. Lincoln's capacity to look beyond his personal

conflicts—beyond the people who thought him to be a joke, a country bumpkin—enabled him to assemble from some of his sharpest critics a group of advisors that would ultimately help him lead the United States through the greatest challenge of our history.

Jesus accuses us—those of us who are inclined to treat others as they treat us—of being, well, *common*. We are supposed to be better than that. Loving those who love us: How does that make us any better than the worst sinner on earth? How can we call ourselves “loving” if we only respond naturally to the treatment of others?

Jesus invites us to see our fellow humans as *God* sees them; to treat them with the same mercy and kindness that *God* shows them—certainly a tall order. A smaller first step might be to simply consider that every one of our enemies has friends and a family who see good in them. Though we may be able to list all of their faults and none of their virtues, we know that each person, including ourselves, has a share of both. How does your enemy’s son or daughter see him? How does her husband think of her? What about their best friend? And what might our enemy think of us? Is there possibly some truth in what *they see* in us?

If we are honest, we know that we are so fortunate to be surrounded by friends and family and a religious community who each day *choose* to see what is best in us, rather than what is worst in us. And if we are truly grateful for that gift, the best way to express it is to extend the favor to those we know, particularly those whose *faults* we know.

Even our worst enemy must have some redeeming quality; the courage to *recognize* that makes us a little more like the One who commands it, and makes us closer to living the hardest sentence of all in this great sermon of his: “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We have a long way to go on that road for sure, but at this table we are offered the strength to make it happen. May we never fail to use it!