

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 19, 2017

“WWJD?”
by Mary Anne Biggs

I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 ~ Matthew 5:38-48

Do you remember those bracelets we used to wear that said “WWJD?” They came in so many colors that many Christians collected them. There was also an ongoing debate over which way the imposing question was to face on one’s wrist. Did you face it so that you were asking yourself every day “What Would Jesus Do?” ... or was it meant to be an evangelical tool to ask others that saw it to consider their own actions in light of what Jesus would do. While I remember this treasure of evangelical culture, I have fewer memories of what it meant to actually discern what Jesus would do in each moment. That part was much more difficult.

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 is a glimpse though, of what Jesus would do. The problem is that for readers in the 21st century ... it’s still not very clear what Jesus would have us do ... and I think a lot of us probably have one of two reactions to this morning’s passage and the (in)famous commands it contains. The first is simple, and a little sad ... we’ve heard Jesus’ commands so often that they hardly register. “Turn the other cheek.” *Yeah -- yawn -- sure.* “Love your enemies.” *Sounds nice -- why not?* And out of our trained indifference we rarely think deeply about actually trying to follow them.

The second response takes Jesus’ words more seriously ... but also assumes they’re somewhat out of reach. “Turn the other cheek.” *Are you kidding?! And get treated like a doormat?* “Love your enemies.” *You can’t be serious!* Both commands ... and a host of Jesus’ other injunctions to boot ... seem from this point of view to be sheer folly ... idealistic sentiments that would be crazy to apply in the “real” world.

But here’s the thing ... Jesus isn’t kidding ... and he is dead serious about these commands. In this sermon, Jesus is outlining his vision of God’s kingdom and issuing a summons to those who desire to be a part of it ... which is why we *need* to take them seriously. Of course, if such sentiments seem a little crazy to us, we’re not alone. Critics from the extreme right and left have often characterized Jesus’ teaching as ludicrous. Consider Ayn Rand, political philosopher, literary bestseller, and recent darling of the Tea Party, who wrote, “If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject.” And then there’s Karl Marx, father of Communism, who said, “The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness.”

However, before dismissing these critiques too quickly ... we should perhaps point out that, indeed, turning the other cheek and returning hatred with love is no way to get ahead in this world ... for the rules of *this* kingdom are well known ... it’s a dog-eat-dog world where only the strong survive. *But that’s just the point.* Jesus isn’t trying to modify the rules of the world. He’s not ... contrary to prosperity preachers ... inviting you to figure out how to make the most of this

world or have your best life now. And he's not even inviting you to find a safe port amid the storms of this world. Rather, he's starting a revolution by calling the rules of this world into question and ... at the very same time ... redeeming this world that he loves and that will, in due time, put him to death.

Jesus calls the powers of the day into question by describing an entirely different way to relate to each other. He is inviting us into relationships governed not by power ... but by vulnerability grounded in love. "An eye for an eye' makes all people blind," Gandhi would similarly say almost two thousand years later. Here Jesus invites us to overcome the urge to retribution with loving submission and forbearance.

Yet he isn't satisfied with merely overturning this world. For the very essence of his critique ... that we were created not merely for justice but also for love and life ... is simultaneously the only possible hope for those enmeshed in the orders of the world. Strength eventually fails. Power corrupts. And survival of the fittest leaves so many bodies on the ground. Love alone transforms, redeems, and creates new life. As Martin Luther King, Jr. ... a student of both Jesus and Gandhi ... once said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness ... only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate ... only love can do that."

So if we are inclined to read over these familiar words too quickly in our haste to get on with the familiar story ... or if we want to dismiss these commands out of hand as pious idealisms ... I'd urge us instead to slow down and take them more seriously. For in these few crazy sentiments, Jesus lays before us the plans for the kingdom he proclaims and the revolution he starts. And so before joining either, we should probably know just what it is we're getting ourselves in for here in the 21st century amidst higher tech and more efficient forms of violence and oppression.

The historical context of Jesus's response to violence might be characterized as passive-aggressive. Scholars suggest that for someone to slap another on the right cheek, it would have likely been a backhanded slap reserved for people considered to be of lower status. So when Jesus challenges his audience to turn the other cheek, he is encouraging a subversive act that equalizes the status of the two people. Giving a person who took a coat a person's cloak, too, would likely embarrass the person who took the coat because without a cloak, the subversive act is standing nearly naked in a culture in which modesty is important. Walking an extra mile breaks the rule that Roman soldiers had which limited their ability to demand someone carry their pack to a single mile. So the early edicts of this passage are not about inaction at all, but instead, Jesus is modeling strategic resistance to oppression that demands action.

During the second part of this passage, Jesus continues to push his audience by admitting the revolutionary nature of these demands. Here, Jesus ensures that his message is political ... meaning more than the self ... that it's more than just personal. He doesn't suggest simply that if your brother punches you in the leg, you self-righteously give him your other leg to punch ... knowing that in the end you both are on the same team anyway. It is easy, after all, to love those with whom you are already in community. Jesus explicitly explains that his challenge is not limited to the realm of family and friends ... but that it includes enemies and those we do not wish to have a connection.

And here he proclaims his most subversive message of all ... he tells us to love them. Love is such a strong presence in the teachings of Jesus that we almost don't hear it anymore. "Love God, love your neighbor, blah blah blah." Until we get to this section in Matthew. "Love your enemies."

WHAT??! He did not say that! And, why on earth would I want to do that?

Well, I wouldn't want to ... which is why he needs to say it. It is so counter-intuitive to think of loving enemies as if they were friends. However we define "enemies" (people who used to be friends ... people who annoy us ... estranged family ... troublemakers ... those with scary political ideas), we are asked to treat them the same as we treat our friends. I don't think this means we should allow ourselves to be abused ... after all, loving someone doesn't mean encouraging that person to continue in evil behavior. But what if we just tried to be a little nicer? To treat the other person the way we might treat a friend? Even to go out of our way to be kind and generous, as Jesus suggests? Such behavior might or might not have an effect on the other person. But I guarantee it will have an effect on us.

As Frederick Buechner wrote in his book *Whistling in the Dark*, "Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them, meaning love not in an emotional sense but in the sense of willing their good, which is the sense in which we love ourselves. ... You see where they're vulnerable. You see where they're scared. Seeing what is hateful about them, you may catch a glimpse also of where the hatefulness comes from. Seeing the hurt they cause you, you may see also the hurt they cause themselves. You're still light-years away from loving them, to be sure, but at least you see how they are human even as you are human, and that is at least a step in the right direction."

Yes, Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

Tax collectors were despised in Jewish culture for being unpatriotic and were seen as unclean by coming into contact with Gentiles.

Jesus continued ... "And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" The Gentiles were considered unclean and unbelievers in Jewish culture, and to be compared to them was insulting. Jesus calls the disciples – us – to a higher standard than this. God's love is seen in the world when communities are concerned with compassion, justice, and care of everyone, especially the most vulnerable.

It's always easier to love the person who already loves us or to talk with the person we already know who likes the same things we do. But Jesus doesn't call us to the easy life ... Jesus calls us to discipleship ... and that means not just mingling with, but embracing the other. That means noticing the awkward person in the corner and inviting him or her into our conversations. That means praying for those who wish us ill and respecting the dignity of every human being, as we promise to do in our baptismal covenant.

Remember, there will be times when we are the awkward person or when we, believe it or not, are someone else's enemy. The Christian life is not a passive life, but very active and intentional. It means seeing God in the other, as God sets no bounds in loving. If we stay inside

the boundaries of where we feel comfortable, wars, racism, ageism, sexism, and prejudice of all kinds will continue.

Look around you in the pews today, or when you're at work or school, or on the street. Catch someone's eye. Hold eye contact for a moment and really look at them. See them as God sees them ... precious and holy ... a child of God. How would it feel to be beheld like that? What is it like to know that you are loved by God with such utter completeness?

Hopefully, it is life changing. Hopefully, this love reminds us that we are all part of something greater ... a community that is larger and more understanding than we know. Hopefully, we will know that we are cared for by a God who really see us and invites us to share what we have to offer to the souls of our neighbors.

As you do so, however, allow one more observation. The last line of this passage ... "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" ... helps to reframe the whole of this passage. For while *telos*, the Greek word Jesus employs, can indeed be translated "perfect," it typically denotes something not so much morally perfect ... as it does something that has grown up, matured ... and now reached its perfect end. That is, *telos* is the goal or desired outcome of a thing. A fruit tree's *telos*, we might say, is to grow mature and tall so that it can bear fruit.

So might Jesus be not simply *commanding* something *of* us but also *commending* something *in* us? That is, perhaps Jesus simply knows that we have more to give ... that we can be and do more than we have settled for ... and that we can absolutely make a difference in the world if we simply believe in ourselves. And so I hear in these commands also the invitation to be those people God has created us to be ... so that we might not just persevere through this challenging life but actually to flourish ... making a difference to those around us by sharing the abundant life Jesus has given us. Crazy? Maybe. But Jesus is not only dead serious about what he promises ... but actually will die ... and rise again! ... to show us that it's true.

May we pray?

Loving God, we your people, bricks in the same building, pieces of the same puzzle, mixed together according to your will, call to you, God who builds, God who solves, God who unites ... to help us love one another as you would have us love. Amen.