

Title: Creatively Bringing in the Kingdom
Matthew 5:38-48
Romans 12:16-20
FCC Decatur Sermon, March 22, 2020
Jennifer Hasler

Matthew 5:38-48:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 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? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

We are continuing our series on the Sermon on the Mount, and letting these words of the Gospel speak anew to our heart. Often the words of the Sermon on the mount are confusing to us as we are separated by time and distance to those whom Jesus is speaking. And yet, to those hearing Jesus preach, these words were amazing.

Remember Jesus was preaching and healing around the region of Galilee, based around Capernaum. Jesus was preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, the realm of how things were supposed to be, how things should be, breaking here and now onto the Kingdom of the Earth. This sermon is one typical sermon as Jesus leads the crowd and his disciples up a sloping hill around the see of Galilee.

Jesus opens with a radical welcome, that those you would never expect to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven, those considered spiritual zeros, are blessed and are an essential part of the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you, for the kingdom of heaven comes to you and is breaking onto earth right here and now. These verses are part of the Beatitudes, which are a form of blessing saying that are meant to overturn expectations. Everyone is welcome, those who never

thought they would amount to anything (or at least so they were told)¹, were called blessed and children of God.

Then Jesus calls these spiritual zeros the salt of the earth. You are the salt of the earth. Not you will be the salt of the earth. You *are* the salt of the earth. Each and everyone one of you, just as you are, are the salt of the earth. Don't try to be something else. The Kingdom needs you, not you imitating someone else. And in living authentically into the kingdom, each of you becomes a light unto the world. Don't hide your authenticity. Don't hide that light. Why would you hide that light? Be transparent, authentic, and live into what God has created for you to be.

And then Jesus states that this bringing in of the Kingdom of Heaven is completely consistent with our tradition. This Kingdom does not abolish Torah, but rather fulfils Torah. Torah and Prophets and writings is our tradition.

And then we get to today's passage. Jesus shifts towards ways individuals bring in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And yet, today's passage causes modern readers a lot of stress, particularly when we listen to these verses on their own. These verses are troubling. We want to hear these verses to say we should let anyone run over us, let anyone abuse us, have warm happy thoughts for our enemies, and in so doing we will be perfect like God and Jesus.

It brings up questions:

- How does being doormat work in real world?
- Does God want us to stay in abusive situations? How can God care about us with such comments? None of us would recommend these directions to someone we loved.
- How does being used by those who are evil bring in the kingdom of God?

Most likely have no interest in following such a God or Jesus.

¹ Those who had done right and had gotten the shorter end of things were now called Children of God. Falls along the original tradition of Jewish thought, of surviving by being clever (like Isaac, Jacob, etc.). Creativity is typical of Jewish experience. Remember we see these points later in creative ways of bringing in the kingdom of God

Lets dig abit deeper. Remember that Jesus is not giving new laws, but rather opening and illustrating the kingdom of God. What could Jesus be teaching? What would those hearing Jesus be thinking? Jesus seemed to be presenting situations that everyone in their day would recognize.

So lets start with a few cases:

“if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”

So why is Jesus specific about being the “right cheek”? Why would it matter whether someone strikes the right or left cheek?

Jewish culture, like most ancient cultures of the time were strongly governed by honor and shame. Everything was governed by honor and shame, including what hand you would do something. The right hand was honorable, the left hand, less honorable and not clean. Some of these rules exist in human cultures today.

So imagine someone is facing you and strikes you on your right cheek. How can one perform this function? It is much easier to demonstrate, but we are practicing social distancing. You cannot use your left hand for to strike someone publically with your left hand would bring dishonor on you. Certainly this situation could be a private situation, and yet, the rest of the passage talks about more public situations. Even in private, individuals likely would still follow these honor rules.

So how would you strike someone’s right cheek. It likely was not a direct strike. If you think about these options for awhile, you realize you have only one real option: you strike the other person with the back of your right hand. To be struck by the back of someone’s hand would be a dishonor. It would be typical for masters to publically strike their slaves this way. It showed the person being struck was far lesser than the one striking.

Jesus says turn the other cheek. Why? Now if he were to strike you, he would either have to use his left hand, which would bring him dishonor, or he would have to strike the other as an equal, which he is unlikely to do after trying to dishonor the one originally struck. The person starting the

violence would be trapped in a difficult situation, and now they likely have to find a non-violent way to settle the conflict.

The individual being struck can be creative in bringing in the Kingdom of God. This individual knows that safety and well-being are in the hands of our loving father in heaven. As the Apostle Paul would say, “To live is for Christ, and to die is gain”. In no way is Jesus saying let others abuse you whenever they want. Jesus could have made that statement, and Greek could easily make that statement. And yet, something far more profound is happening that Jesus’ hearers would immediately understand. When a difficult situation happens, know you are free to find a creative, even potentially subversive solution towards bringing in the Kingdom of God. These perspectives are consistent with tradition, as the Jewish people throughout their history have been creative in standing for justice and for their own survival.

“and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;”

Jesus is not really just saying give into anyone who would sue you for anything. We hear elsewhere that we should settle things between believers and others in general before getting to court if possible. And yet, Jesus is addressing something different.

If someone is being sued for their clothes, they were likely a poor individual. Many in the crowd would connect with the poor individual and at least the threat they might have been experiencing. By Torah, a person who lost their coat would have it returned by sundown. Someone suing for their coat likely has little respect for the poor.

So Jesus suggests why not give your cloak as well. Jewish society found nakedness a terrible shame, and therefore such a bold move shows publically the injustice is being done. Others might see this obvious injustice and hopefully will bring a more reasonable reconciliation. Jesus is not giving a law, but rather allowing for amazing creativity in bringing in the Kingdom of God.

“if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

Everyone in Jesus' day knew what Jesus was referring. The Romans. The hated Romans who occupied their land. One could make the argument that an independent Jewish state would have been equally difficult, but that is a discussion for another day. Jesus was referring to the practice that along Roman roads there were road markers. If you were on that road, Roman soldiers could have you carry a load to the next road marker. Often governments make major roads for the movement of military and related infrastructure resources. Consider that likely when Matthew was written was just before or just at the beginning of the Jewish revolt against Rome. One can imagine how the crowd was hearing this message.

So Jesus provides a creative response. How about carrying the load to the following road marker? Can you imagine the reaction of the Roman soldiers having someone being helpful to them? All they get is negativity all day long, typical of many of our law enforcement officials today. Can you imagine that these Jesus' followers would be known as those who see the humanity of the soldiers? Is anyone surprised that many Roman soldiers would eventually follow this Jesus movement? Imagine the ways of bringing in the Kingdom in places you would never expect.

Now is Jesus giving a rule? Say the Roman soldier just needs something carried one mile. Do you think the follower of Jesus starts to argue and says I am required to carry it two miles. While that might seem amusing, that is not at all what Jesus is saying. Rather, consider your circumstances and look for creative ways to bring in the Kingdom of God.

This passage of scripture, far from being a passage to dread or avoid, empowers the children of the Kingdom of God to be creative in how they go about bringing in the Kingdom. The children of the Kingdom can find creative ways to love those around them, including loving their enemies.

Four years ago I had the opportunity to go on a *class* weekend field trip to civil rights sites in AL. We were able to march over the Selma Bridge on the 51st anniversary of the original protest.

The evening before, we heard a story told by one of Dr. King's sisters who came to meet with

us. She wanted to share a story about ““Martin” early in his ministry in 1955. She talked about seeing Martin that evening, and noticed his collar was out of place, and seemed like he was roughed up as a result of an earlier non-violent event. She apparently called him later that day. She described to us how he described what happened that day in Montgomery. She also told about the tears she cried during this phone call, as any sister would when their brother was hurt. We would not be surprised if she started crying right then as she relived the experience in front of us. She then got quiet and then continues with “Martin’s” response that “they just needed to love them more” in response to the violence, that they needed to reach out more, not less.

After being beaten, “just needed to love them more.” Does anyone believe he just wanted to get beaten again for no reason, or there was a creative goal behind what was happening?

“just needed to love them more”

MLK died roughly 52 years ago (April 4, 1968, Memphis, TN). And yet, we see from his example an embodiment of Jesus message today. We see his followers in the book of Acts and followers down through the century would do to bring in the Kingdom of God. They would creatively bring in the Kingdom of God. And Christ calls you, each an every one of you, to creatively bring in the Kingdom of God. Even in our uncertain times we find ourselves. Finding creative ways and ideally non-violent ways to stand up to the ways of this world.

“just needed to love them more”

“just needed to love them more”