

Beyond Being Right
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 23, 2014
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18;
 Psalm 119.33-40;
 1 Corinthians 3.10-11, 16-23;
 Matthew 5.38-48

What is your first instinct when someone lays some expectations on you that go way beyond what you could possibly achieve? I suppose it depends on your personality. Some of you might be the fiercely stubborn kind. Impossible expectations are just kind of fire you need to get you motivated. For others, over the top expectations become an opportunity for “creative rationalization.”

Someone I was reading this week was laying out some of the creative rationalization the church has brought to the seemingly impossible expectations of the Sermon on the Mount. We’ve been reading our way through this sermon for several weeks and today’s passage continues where last Sunday’s text left off. We have the familiar exhortations “turn the other cheek, give the extra coat, go the extra mile.”

So here is a quick summary of some of the ways Christians have tried to say in one way or another “Jesus didn’t really mean that we should actually do these things!” The first is to claim that Jesus is setting an intentionally high bar for us to aspire to. He knows we won’t ever get there but by trying we might get close. The second is to say that Jesus was exposing just how impossible the road of works righteousness really is. It’s impossible to earn your salvation and so it pushes us to understand our need for grace. Can you guess between these two which is the protestant reading of the text? A third, more recent, reading of the text takes a different angle all together which is to say that Jesus is offering some practical advice to empower those who are oppressed. When you can’t make people treat you with justice then do what you can to expose the

injustice of their action.¹ So if someone in power strikes your face, do not cower in fear or shame but boldly turn the other cheek to expose just how brutal and violent they have become. I like to think of this last reading as the subversive handbook of social justice. When I hear this summary, I have to say I'm not sure I'd call all of these creative rationalizations. I can see some value in hearing the text in any one of these three ways.

In fact, let me share one more I ran across this week that I found quite compelling. This Methodist pastor was reflecting on the use of the phrase "You have heard it said....but I say to you." Jesus is talking with his disciples and he begins with aspects of the law: "You have heard it said" and then names some clear cut command from the Law of Moses. Like last week: You shall not murder. Or even this week: "An eye for an eye." These are clear, simple commands. With those clear, simple commands, it is easy to take the position of being right. I haven't done that this week, so I'm good! Then, Jesus goes further and says "but I say to you." He deepens the law beyond clear and simple command to the attitude of heart that inspires the law. And every time that he does this, he invites us to move beyond being right to consider more carefully the quality of our relationships with one another.²

I read a quote this week on facebook that captured this idea well. Rev. Kate Davelaar apparently shared this quote from G. K. Chesterton with Rev. Jes Kast-Keat, a former intern from Hope Church. It said: "Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair." That's where I want to center our attention for this morning as we interact with this text. How can we hear these texts this morning in a way that moves us beyond the theories of what is the "right" way to interpret this text and pushes us instead to fall in love again with the God these texts reveal?

Did you notice in the passage from Leviticus how frequently we hear the phrase "I am the Lord"? I counted - six times in 13 verses. After each

¹ Summary comes from Greg Carey, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pg. 381 & 383.

² The Rev. Michael Chamness, pastor of Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church in St. George, in his blog post from February 14, 2014 entitled: "Don't focus on being right; strive to be loving"

instruction and every command this phrase is repeated. In fact the whole passage begins: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." You can hear this as a command; another instance of an impossible expectation. Or you can hear this as a promise. One scholar I was reading made the case that the mood of this phrase can be imperative which is probably the way we normally hear it: "You SHALL be holy as in you BETTER be holy!" Or the mood can also be declarative: "Stay with me and you WILL become holy." ³

If you want to see what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in living color – then watch his life unfold in the gospels. If you want to see what it looks like for someone to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile and refuse to resist an evil doer and love your enemies...watch Jesus in action.

In him, we see the way a human being grows in holiness. He continues to keep the Word of God before him. The whole Sermon on the Mount is an engagement with the Law of Moses. Did you hear in Matthew echoes of the passage from Leviticus? He keeps the Word of God in front of him not as some theory that he can pontificate about. He keeps the Word of God close to his heart as a way to keep God close to his heart so that every time he looks at another human being he sees that person the way that God does....and it leads him into the realm of love and relationship rather than the realm of theory and certitude. And it also steers him away from what I was talking about with the children – an endless cycle of retaliation.

I'm aware of the danger inherent in this teaching of Jesus about love of enemies and turning the other cheek. I'm aware of the way that this teaching has been used by abusers to keep people in unsafe situations. I'm aware of the way that the language of love and relationship might sound like a command to be passive in the face of injustice. So I want to spend a brief moment before we close looking at that part of Jesus' teaching today through that lens of falling in love again with God more so than finding the perfect interpretation of this text.

³ Sheldon W. Sorge, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 364.

What Jesus advocates here is not simple passivity. Let me just use one example. It was a Roman law that soldiers could require any citizen of the empire to carry their bag for them for one mile.⁴ If a soldier comes along and tells you to carry his bag for a mile, you do it because you have no choice. If you decide instead I'm going to carry this pack not for one mile but for two you have changed the terms. You are making a choice. You are no longer doing what the oppressive regime requires of you. You are subtly (as one scholar put it) engaging in "non-adversarial defiance."⁵

This isn't quite as simple as exposing injustice as I spoke of it before. If that were the goal, you would still be engaged in the cycle of retaliation. They imposed their bag on you – you will expose them as the oppressor that they are! The logic here is different from that: it's a decision to step out of the game of opposition all together⁶ – to say to that soldier – "You may see me as your enemy whom you can walk all over...I refuse to see you as mine. I'm going to take this bag and I'm going to walk with you not for one but for two miles and at the end of that time let's see if we can see each other in some new light."

This is just one example Jesus takes from their contemporary life to give a taste of what he envisions for us. There is no question that there are times when we must stand up and say "No" to the things people ask of us or try to do to us. But the question is – how can I say no and still refuse to see this one as my enemy? What creative, subversive ways can I find to step out this game of opposition?

As I said to the children, this is not what comes naturally to most of us. And when I see Jesus in action in the gospel living out this wisdom that he shares here in the Sermon on the Mount – I am blown away by the brilliance and the beauty of it.

I've offered three or four ways Christians have tried to make sense of this passage. I'm not actually all that interested in which theory is "correct."

⁴ Someone once told me about this Roman law – I have no idea where the source of that information came from now!

⁵ Matthew Myer Boulton, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 383.

⁶ This idea of "stepping out of the game of opposition" is from Matthew Myer Boulton as well.

What I am interested in is a way to read this text that stirs me to stand in awe of the God who does love in this way.

I want to live like this!

Don't you want to live like this - to love like this?

I know that on most days we don't pull it off.

But the promise of scripture keeps pulling us forward:

"You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, **am** holy....so stick with me...and you will be too!"

Thanks be to God!