

The Call to Perfection
Matthew 5:38-48
February 19, 2017 – Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

For the last two weeks we have been concentrating on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – Chapters Five through Seven of Matthew's Gospel. As you may remember, I stated two weeks ago that these three chapters, in many ways form the model and we might even say the manual for disciples of Jesus Christ. If we want to know how a Christian should live, how we should act, and what should guide our decisions, I don't think we'll find a much better source than the Sermon on the Mount.

Today, our reading is the end of Chapter Five. The lesson begins with those admonitions: if someone strikes you on the right cheek offer the left as well; if someone takes your shirt, give them your coat as well; if someone forces you to carry their pack one mile, carry it two miles; give to all who ask; don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you. I've preached sermons before about the meaning of all this, about disarming hatred with loving response, about countering violence with peace. How often I have wondered what would happen if the United States of America were to put even just half of its military budget into world-wide humanitarian aid instead of weapons. Now, I know that's not realistic, but I still wonder. . .

But today, let's move on to the next admonition. As if the "stuff" we just heard was not hard enough, now we read: "Love your enemies; and pray for those who persecute you." Friends, Jesus is not suggesting that we merely give lip service to this. It's easy to send up a quick prayer for your enemies. No, Jesus is saying that we must truly love, care for, embrace our enemies, those who hate us, those who would do us harm, for they too are children of God. And then comes that very confusing verse – a verse that should ring in the heart of every United Methodist: "Be perfect therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect." I cover this verse in every new member class and every confirmation class, and consistently, it's met with statements like, "That's not possible; only Jesus was perfect." And some have suggested that even Jesus showed traits of human imperfection. But John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement in eighteenth century England, latched on to this verse, such that it became the cornerstone of his faith. Every Methodist preacher is called to "go on to Christian Perfections." When I was ordained, I was asked, "Are you going on to Christian Perfection?"; and, if I had said "No," the bishop would not have ordained me. Now, I've said before, that luckily they did not ask me if I had achieved Christian Perfection. They only asked if I was going on to Christian Perfection, if that was my goal in life.

So how do we, the disciples of Jesus Christ, deal with Jesus command to be perfect? In part, the answer comes from the original Greek. The word that is translated "perfect" can also be translated "complete." Thus, the Common English

Bible translates this verse: “Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.” Now, I’m not sure it’s any easier to be complete in love, to be totally filled with love – I’m not sure that’s any easier than to be perfect. What’s Jesus saying – we must be completely loving of all God’s creation, all people, all animals, all the planet, and yes, *all* means *all* – no exceptions. We’re back to that word again – *Agape*. I have often stated that Jesus is the personification of God’s amazing love – the total embodiment of love. And, as Christians we are called to come ever closer to the person of Jesus, in all we think and say and do.

With the exception of a brief portion on Ash Wednesday, the lectionary does not deal with Chapters Six and Seven – the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks ago, I suggested that you take the time to read the entire Sermon – all three chapters in their entirety, and I again make that recommendation. But let me know delve a little further into the Sermon on the Mount.

Last week I introduced a Greek word that appears four times in the Sermon – the word is *Dikaiosyne*. The word is most often translated righteousness; and what does righteousness mean? When I teach Sunday School, I tell classes that righteousness is simply doing what is right – what is right in the eyes of God, what is right in the light of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

A few weeks back, actually on the same Sunday that we looked at the Beatitudes, in the interest of time, I gave up the opportunity to read one of my favorite Bible verses from the Old Testament. Some of you know that the lectionary, that calendar of suggested scriptures to be read on every Sunday of the year always contains four passages: an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, an Epistle Reading and a Gospel Reading. As a clergy person bound to a set length of service, I must pick and choose which passages to use on a given Sunday. Sometimes I also pare down the passages; and, I confess that on rare occasions I add a verse or two. But the Sunday we studied the Beatitudes, which was also Communion Sunday, the Old Testament Reading was Micah 6:1-8 – a passage that ends with that well known verse: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Righteousness – doing what is right – doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

Dikaiosyne is also sometimes translated as *justice*. *Justice* comes from the word *just* – to be fair; and usually in the Bible is means equity. It means treating all people equally. It means giving the poor, the under-privileged, the marginalized the same opportunities and advantages as the rich. Friends, I get really upset when I hear, mostly on the new media, of people speaking of justice when what they really mean is vengeance. I hear of “justice being served” be dealing out certain forms of punishment, by “getting even.” That’s not justice, that’s retribution, that’s not turning the other cheek or walking the extra mile, that’s retaliation. That’s not love. That’s not *dikaiosyne*. That’s not the Christian

call. The Christian call is to love kindness. To love your neighbor as yourself. That's the justice to which Jesus calls his followers. (Understand, I'm not suggesting that we let crime go unanswered. But I am suggesting that our "Department of Correction and Rehabilitation should concentrate more on rehabilitation and less on punishment.)

There's another word that *dikaiosyne* is sometimes translated as – *piety*. *Piety* means walking with God. *Piety* means being in relationships with God such that we can help further God's purposes for the world; and above all else I believe God's purpose is grounded in love. The writer of the First Epistle of John tells us that God is love. If God is *agape* love, walking with God means grounding our life on that love of God. (I might suggest that, right after you read the Sermon on the Mount, put the First Letter of John next on your reading list.)

So. . . *Dikaiosyne* - Piety, Justice, Righteousness. It's the mark of a true disciple, a follower of the risen Christ. What is the call of Christ? – To be complete in love. What does the Lord require of us, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. May it be so for each of us, individually and collectively. May it be so for our church, for our communities, and for our nation. May it be so for our world.

Let us pray. . .

Lord, help us.
Help us as individuals;
help us as a church;
and help us as a nation
to practice *dikaiosyne* -
to do justice, to love kindness
and to walk in the path where you lead us,
every day of our lives.
Amen.

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