2-11/12-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 5:38-48 Choose Love Choosing God’s Kingdom Series

As today we honor the ministries of scouting, consider once again the words to the Boy Scout and Girl Scout Laws:

*Boy Scout Law:* A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.

*Girl Scout Law:* I will do my best to be honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, and responsible for what I say and do, and to respect myself and others, respect authority, use resources wisely, make the world a better place, and be a sister to every Girl Scout.

Scouts are taught how to relate to other people in helpful, friendly, considerate ways. If you Scouts carry these values into your adult lives, if we all live by these honoring values, what a different world it would be!

My husband and I both have experience in scouting. Yet I will admit there are times when neither of us live by these scout values. There are times when we are not helpful nor kind, times when we are not thrifty nor considerate of one another. Yet we are grounded in our commitment to one another—a choice to love, a choice to be loyal, a choice to respect, a choice to forgive.

Today, we continue our sermon series on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount- his teaching to his disciples on God’s kingdom ways in this world. We began with the Beatitudes, and a reminder that before we ever say or do anything, we are loved by God. Then we heard a call to be salt and light in this world, reflecting God’s ways in the midst of our daily lives.

Last week and this week we are called to choose how we will live in relationship with God and with one another. Will we live based on our selfish desires or seeking God’s desire for our lives?

Will we live based on rules or on relationships? How will we live in our relationships with others?

The call is not easy, to live by God’s kingdom ways in this world. The call is counter-culture, for it goes against our selfish attitudes and ingrained desires. Yet the call is foundational to all who choose to follow Christ.

In our passage today, Jesus gives us concrete examples of how to live based on what his followers would know well—expectations from the book of Leviticus. He reminds us of specific expectations ("You have heard that it was said ..."), yet then goes deeper to God’s ultimate desire for our relationships ("... but I say to you ...").

First, Jesus says to us, “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.”

Our human nature has been conditioned to want revenge when we are wronged. We naturally want to retaliate when someone has hurt us. You wrong me? I will wrong you—and more.

You hurt me? I will hurt your family.

This is the basis for an entire genre of revenge fantasy movies, where a vulnerable hero is wronged or hurt by some sinister person or force then sets out to get revenge. Consider Liam Neeson in the *Taken* movies or Matt Damon in the *Jason Bourne* series or any of *The Avengers* movies. This thirst for revenge makes good movie fodder, yet how does it really play out in real life?

Consider this story that is repeated often on elementary playgrounds. ..Two fourth-graders get into it during recess; something about "he did this, so I did that" and it kind of goes south from there. When they get back to class, Billy trips Joey. After lunch, Joey breaks Billy's pencil on purpose. When nobody is looking, Billy writes on Joey's desk, and later, Joey steals Billy's folder.

After school, Billy and his friends face Joey and his friends, and they call each other names. Somebody gets hurt. Somebody else gets hurt worse.

And then there is no telling when or if these conflicts will ever end. Sound familiar? We have all experienced this sort of escalating pettiness and we readily admit that it is silly. But I would suggest to you that we can remove the names "Billy" and "Joey" and insert the words "husband" and "wife" and the story is much the same. Or we could insert the names of two rival high schools [it was Franklin and Springboro when I was growing up-ALH], or two rival companies, or "The Hatfields" and "The McCoys." Or Republicans and Democrats, or…

Conflict at any level is conflict. And if not preventable, most conflict is at least resolvable...but not until one side refuses to retaliate and instead decides to reconcile.

 --Steve Molin, He Hit Me First! Sermons.com, adapted

Our human nature may thirst for revenge, yet that revenge will also spiral out of control into a never-ending cycle of violence if we allow it. Such was the common practice in the time of our faith ancestors. You kill me? I will kill your children. Your wrong me? Then I will wrong your family for generations to come.

Jesus’ “you have heard that is was said” statement was actually a commandment of God to stop the cycle of violence, limiting retribution to only the severity of the crime committed.

Leviticus 24:20 declares: “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The same injury the person inflicted on the other will be inflicted on them.” This law in the ancient world was known as *Lex Talionis*, the law of tit for tat, a law of mercy found even in the code of Hammurabi in Babylon 1800 years before Christ.

This limited retribution was the expectation, and the rule, in the time of Jesus. Yet Jesus desired redemption, not retribution. “But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.”

Jesus calls for a stop to the cycle of violence entirely. He demands that his followers not sink to the level of meanness of those who are out to hurt them, demean them or challenge them to return evil with evil, whether physical or emotional.

Jesus then gives three examples for his hearers to respond in nonviolent ways. Since most of his hearers were poor, he gives them ways to redeem the indignity of their situation.

 *“If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”*

In Jewish society, a strike on the right cheek would not be a punch, for to punch with the left hand was considered unclean. Rather this strike would be a backhand to the right cheek, done as an insult rather than an injury. This backhanded strike would be leveled by a person in a position of power or superiority with the intention to humiliate the one struck. To turn the other cheek, then, was a way of showing that the one struck was not defeated or demeaned.

*“If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.”*

It was common in Jewish society for a debtor to take the outer garment, the coat, as collateral for a loan during the day, even though it was to be returned at night to sleep in. When a person was going to be taken to court over their debts and knew they cannot win, to give their cloak as well was to give their undergarment, thus standing naked in front of the debtor and causing that person shame for looking upon their nakedness. Such an incredible act would humiliate the creditor more than the debtor.

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

Common Roman military practice forced poor Jews to carry their heavy 65+ pound packs for a mile when the military was on the move. Yet if the pack was carried beyond a mile that was an infringement of military rules. Imagine a Roman soldier begging a poor Jew for his pack back when that Jew offers to carry it another mile. This would have been humorous to Jesus’ disciples. --adapted from Walter Wink “The Third Way” csec.org 11-14-93

These surprising examples of non-violent resistance were ways that allowed Jesus’ hearers to live with dignity in an undignified situation. Consider the situations where you have felt demeaned, degraded or dismissed by someone else and wanted to lash out in anger or even violence. Jesus reminds us to not give in to the cycle of violence. We can take a step back, pause, take a deep breath and remember who and whose we are. We can remember our blessedness that is never taken away from us by another person. Then, in remembering who we are, we do not give others control to define us.

..The late US syndicated columnist Sydney J. Harris once accompanied his friend George to Georges’ favorite newsstand. George greeted the man selling the newspapers courteously, but in return he received gruff service. He barely acknowledged his customer and never even looked up at him when he requested the late night edition. Accepting the newspaper, which was shoved rudely in his direction, George politely smiled and wished the newsman a pleasant weekend. The proprietor grunted an indiscernible sound and seemed relieved that the two men had completed their transaction.

As the two friends walked down the street the columnist asked, "Does he always treat you so rudely?" "Yes, unfortunately, he does," George responded. "And are you always so kind and friendly to him?" "Yes, I am!" George continued as they turned a corner. "Why are you so nice when he is so unfriendly to you?" With a look of deep contemplation, George explained, "Because I don’t want him to decide how I am going to act."

--From a sermon by Dennis Selfridge, Neither Do I Condemn You, 3/3/2010, sermoncentral.com

Next, Jesus says to us, “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.”

If our human tendency is toward revenge for those who hurt us, then we have to admit that not all of our neighbors will be our friends. Some will be our enemies. I doubt if anyone here has an enemy out to kill them, yet there will always be those with whom we disagree. There will also be those who work against us, who seek to poison others’ opinions of us, even those who will seek to harm us, physically, mentally or emotionally. This has been true since Cain killed Abel.

And our human nature is to never forgive those who have wronged us.

In Leviticus 19:18 the Lord declares: “You must love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet the unwritten rule was that a person was allowed to hate one’s enemy. The Jews who knew well the letter of the law knew where they must be charitable to friend or enemy and where they could draw the line.

Yet again, Jesus took this commandment a step further. “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This is where Jesus gets to meddlin’ in today’s passage.

Love your enemies? Pray for those who persecute you? Really, Jesus?

And Jesus says to us, yes, really. I see the animosity and fear that divides you. I see the anger and bitterness in your hearts and on your Facebook pages. I see the refusal to listen to the stories and to validate the experiences of those you deem different than you. Those are the ways of the world. Those are not God’s kingdom ways of living.

“If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the despised 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?”

“Anybody can love their friends,” Jesus says, “because that’s natural. The real measure of the loving, grace-filled, gospel heart is its ability to drum up some compassion even for the folks with whom you won’t spend relaxing evenings around a dining table, even for the people who won’t have you over for tea because they’re too busy sneering at you behind your back. Loving *them* is the real challenge!”

-- Scott Hoezee 2-17-14 cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-7a

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

..Writer and surgeon Bernie Siegel tells the story of Wild Bill, an inmate of a concentration camp, who after six years of serving the enemy as an interpreter, was still full of energy and physical health and a gentle positive spirit. To the other prisoners, he was a beacon of hope, an agent of reconciliation, one who was constantly urging them to forgive each other and the enemy. This man’s positive spirit was all the more amazing because of the horror which he himself had experienced at the beginning of the war — watching his own family: his wife, his two daughters, his three little boys, shot before his very eyes by Nazi soldiers in Warsaw.

When asked to explain his lack of bitterness, Wild Bill responded, “I had to decide right then whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really.

I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people’s minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who matter most to me in the world.

 I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life — whether it was a few days or many years — loving every person I came in contact with.”

--“The Offense of Grace” 1-20-17 ministrymatters.com

The heart of God is a heart of love. And that is how God will change the world, through the love of one heart caring for another heart, through one person forgiving another person, through one prayer at a time.

This passage is not calling on Christians to become passive doormats, to be silent when abused, or to not stand up for themselves in self-defense. There will be times when a love for enemies will be at a distance, behind healthy boundaries. There is still a need for appropriate justice in this world for those who persecute and harass others.

Rather, this passage is calling Christians to a counter-cultural choice of living by love, by grace, by forgiveness, in our relationships with others. To love one’s enemy negates their power in our lives. To pray for those who harass us is to desire the best in them rather than the worst to happen to them, praying for God’s transforming grace to be present not only in our own lives, but in their lives as well.

And when we choose love, we choose to act as children of our heavenly Father. Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors, Jesus declares, so that others will see your blessedness, your foundation in God through faith in me.

Debra Samuelson once said, .. To love your neighbor as yourself does not mean that you must have a cozy, warm feeling in your heart toward those who have inflicted the greatest pain on you or on your loved one. God knows that feeling of love is sometimes simply not possible. What Leviticus and Jesus both are talking about, though, is not love the feeling but love the action. The action of love is what is required here-letting go of the hatred, letting go of the bitterness, letting go of the self-righteousness that, in fact, is eating you alive.

 --Debra Samuelson 10-23-05 day1.org Munching from the Inside-Out

.. In a sermon written in a Georgia jail and preached just after the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this about loving your enemies: "Of course this is not practical; life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog... My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way.

 --Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin

 Luther King, Jr., page 596, quoted by Chuck Queen, Love Your Enemies on Sermons.com

…Abraham Lincoln was once criticized by an associate for his attitude toward political enemies.

The associate asked, “Why do you always make friends of them? You should destroy them!” Lincoln replied, “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?”

 --Greg Laurie, “Turn your enemies into friends,” WorldNetDaily, 11-10-07, wnd.com.

in A Bloodless Bullfight Homiletics.com 2-20-11

Loving our neighbors as ourselves, loving our enemies, praying for those who do us wrong—these are not easy ways to live. Yet—when we strive to live by love, our love is based in God’s love for us.

God, who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good…God, who sends the nourishing rain on the righteous and the unrighteous…God, who gives grace and goodness to everyone, regardless of whether or not they will accept such grace…God loves us all. God cares for us all. And we are called to care for all around us based not on whether they are deserving, but based on how God cares for us, we who are also undeserving of such mighty love and grace.

Every way that Jesus has called us to live, this week and last, every behavior and attitude, every expectation and desire, boils down to the final verse in today’s passage. Why ought we to live by love? Because God is love. God is perfect love. And we are called to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This perfection is not a moral perfection where we do everything right; neither is it a perfect score from a perfect life. This is the perfection of purpose, living as God intends for us to live.

"Perfect," in this case, stems from *telos*, the Greek word for "goal," "end," or "purpose." The sense of the word is more about becoming what was intended, accomplishing one's God-given purpose in the same way that God constantly reflects God's own nature and purpose.

-- David Lose 2-13-11 workingpreacher.org

John Wesley would say we seek perfection as we become more like Christ. When we claim the name of Christ, when we seek to live as Christians, we are called to live more and more like the one whose name we bear. This perfection is completeness.

I love the way this verse is translated by Eugene Peterson: “In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” (MSG Matt 5:48)

We are called, as God’s beloved and blessed, to follow the teaching and example of God’s Son Jesus. Jesus calls us to live by God’s kingdom ways in this world, taking God’s love to the world.

We are called to choose how we will live. We are called to choose love over hate, forgiveness over fear, grace over judgment. We are called to love as we are loved.

A challenge? Oh yes. Yet person by person, relationship by relationship, this is how God’s kingdom will come to this world. This is how God will work in and through us. Through our choice of how to live, through our choice to love.

May the Holy Spirit guide our choices, this day and everyday.

May it be so. Let us pray.