

“Loving Enemies.”

Matthew 5:37-48

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Pastor Peter Hanson

Christ the King Lutheran Church

Feb. 19, 2017

Certain dates, certain events stay so vivid in our minds that we often describe ourselves as remembering exactly where we were and what we were doing at those times. D-Day. The Kennedy Assassination. The Challenger explosion. Mandela's release. And of course, more recently, September 11. Strangely enough, my most vivid recollection of 9/11 actually happened on September 12.

We were living in France, doing language training in preparation for our mission service with the ELCA. Our language school was attached to a regional university, but the students were not typical college-aged students. They were older students from China, Thailand, and South Korea hoping to gain entrance into graduate programs in France. They were professionals from the Middle East and Eastern Europe, seeking new opportunities in increasingly global markets. Our program was immersive—five to six hours a day in the classroom or language lab, with strict instructions to speak only French, no matter what your level. Our homework included trips to the bakery and grocery stores, setting up telephone service or opening a bank account. And September 11, 2001 was only our seventh day of class together.

Because of the time zone difference, it was already late afternoon when the airliners were hijacked, when they were flown directly into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, or crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania. We watched the news that evening, struggling to understand the incomprehensible news, made all the worse by only having a week's worth of French under my belt. At three in the morning, I finally connected with my brother who I knew commuted every day from New Jersey to New York, changing subway trains at the World Trade Center between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. By the morning of the 12th, we were back in our routine, dropping kids at day care and pre-K, and heading off to conjugate some verbs, or learn when to use the subjunctive case.

The first people to meet me as I entered the classroom that day were two journalists from Libya, Saïd and Mohammed. They dropped what they were doing, leapt to their feet and crossed the room quickly to meet me at the door. Each one shook my hand and quickly touched their hearts—a gesture I would later learn was a sign of deepest sincerity and respect among Muslims, particular from the Arab region. In fact, both of them kept their hands over

their hearts as they spoke to me, first in the kind of French you speak after one week of instruction, then in the much more polished, even formal English of international journalism. “What has happened to you and your country is a tragedy. You are in our prayers. And, we hope and pray that this was not carried out by someone from our country or our government, although we know that that is indeed a possibility, as our leaders consider us to be enemies. We hope and pray that it was not one of us—but if it was, we also hope and pray that you will forgive us on their behalf.” Finally, he offered a blessing prayer, they both shook my hand again, once again touching their hearts.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

This text from the gospel of Matthew is the fourth and final portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we've been looking at now for the past few weeks. And here in week four, as I noted earlier this week. Jesus is getting political. His “Sermon on the Mount” has moved from the general to the specific, from the poetic to the problematic. And yes, he even ventures into the world of the political—whether we like it or not.

As he moves from “blessed are those” to “blessed are you” to this new and challenging refrain of “you have heard it say to those of ancient times but I say to you,” his examples become more vivid, more striking, and, truth be told, more specific, cultural, contextual, and yes, more political. It's interesting, there are so many phrases from the Sermon on the Mount in general and from this section of it in particular that have found their way into our everyday parlance, often to the extent that we have the lost power of their original meaning. Go the second mile, for instance, or turn the other cheek. In our day and age, in our own cultural context, these phrases have often been reduced to little more than pithy sayings, tag lines, maxims for better living. Go the second mile might describe the commendable effort of working harder, doing more than what is asked of you, going above and beyond the call of duty. Turn the other cheek has often been reduced to a variation of being nice, of not sinking to another's level, of going high when someone else goes low.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink reminds us that at the time of Jesus, Roman law allowed soldiers and other authorities to demand that inhabitants of occupied territories carry messages or equipment the distance of one mile post, but prohibited forcing an individual to

go further than a single mile, at the risk of suffering disciplinary actions by their superior officers. Jesus criticizes an unjust and hated Roman law, while also calling his followers to nonviolent direct action that could actually cause punishment for those who impose it on them.

Similarly, striking someone of a lower class with the back of the hand was used to assert authority and dominance. If the persecuted person "turned the other cheek," the discipliner was faced with a dilemma. The left hand was considered unclean, so a back-hand strike on the opposite cheek would not be performed. An alternative would be a slap with the open hand as a challenge or to punch the person, but this was seen as a statement of equality. Here again, by turning the other cheek the persecuted person was defiantly challenging the status quo, and actually demanding equality from his oppressor.

While we might be tempted to think so, what Jesus is calling for here is not simply working harder or taking the high road. Jesus directly challenges the judicial system of his day, telling his followers to actively limit retribution and payback. He advocates for active (though nonviolent) resistance to the powers that be, including the occupying military force of a conquering empire. And he doesn't stop there. He endorses generous donations to any and all panhandlers, surpassing required legal payouts, and limitless lending to anyone in need. Perhaps more than all that, **Jesus commands his followers—then and now—to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them.**

There is something quite countercultural about what Jesus is proposing here—but as much as we need to be reminded from time to time, we really shouldn't be surprised. It is after all, part of what we all sign on for when we make promises in baptism, or when we affirm those promises at various times during our life. It's part of what Katie and Jarred are signing on for on behalf of Alexander, as they bring him to these waters today. In baptism, we promise that we will live among God's people, that we will hear God's word and share in Christ's meal, that we will proclaim the good news of Jesus in word and deed, that we will serve ALL people—following Jesus' example, and that we will strive for justice and peace throughout the earth.

Yes, and in order to do this, God's people—salt and light that we are—are often called to go against the grain of our own community, of our wider society, of our "body politic." We are called to put *others* first, to become great by working toward the *common good*. Contrary to

the politics of his day or of ours, **Jesus calls us into a vision of God's world, where genuine and unconditional love reigns.** Where justice seeks not so much to punish and demean as to restore relationships. Where those in need are cared for, not shunned and excluded. Where generosity knows no limits, and God's abundance is freely shared. Where enemies are embraced and loved, where persecutors are prayed for. Where family members of those killed in a Bible Study in South Carolina forgive the confessed killer even before he stands trial. Where journalists from the regime of Muammar Gadhafi cross the room to pledge and American their prayers and ask for his forgiveness.

Because if you love only those who love you, what's the big deal? Everybody does that. And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, so what? Even the Gentiles, the pagans, the unbelievers do the same, don't they? Nazis and communists surely loved those who loved them, and greeted one another with kindness and even affection. Al Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, Al Shabbab, they must certainly all do that.

No, we need to strive for more. We need to live up to a higher standard. Jesus says to love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. Be perfect, as God in heaven is perfect.

Of course we can't. Not fully, not always, certainly not by ourselves. But the hope and promise of these words are encoded directly into their command. We are works in progress. God is at work perfecting us, deepening our commitment, refining our witness. For we are children of the One who makes the sun rise on both the evil and on the good, who sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous alike.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Blessed are you. Rejoice and be glad. AMEN.