

## **“Is Jesus Kidding Here?”**

### **Matthew 5:43-48**

World Communion Sunday – October 3, 2004

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

It happened during worship about a year and a half ago. I was leading the pastoral prayer (“the long prayer” some call it), when I felt like I was going to choke. Something felt stuck in my throat and the sound coming out was more like a frog . . . or a truck . . . or something other than my usual voice. It happened when I asked God to bless Saddam Hussein.

Because Jesus commands that we pray for our enemies, we prayed for Saddam that morning and I asked God to melt his heart or turn around his life, or something like that, but my voice cracked and my throat tightened up and I could barely get the words out. While his name was on my lips, my mind was flooded with images of his evil sons pillaging the countryside, or his minions hacking off the hands of people who looked at them the wrong way, or Saddam’s own wicked smile looking down upon the powerless before he sentenced them to die some hideous death.

I don’t *want* to pray for my enemies. I much prefer *schadenfreude* – that delicious German term for the delight we feel when our enemies falter.

But today is World Communion Sunday and we find ourselves hearing some difficult words from Jesus.

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Remember the two great commandments? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus spoke those words but he was quoting the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Even when Jesus was a young man, they were already ancient words.

But now Jesus is pushing our limits. Here Jesus is telling us to love our *enemies* as well as our neighbors. Jesus is telling us to “be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.”

And this all comes after Jesus has told us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to “give to everyone” (*everyone?*) who begs from us, and to loan money to anybody who wants to borrow from us.

***Is Jesus kidding here?***

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

Imagine a world in which we responded to Osama bin Laden by “turning the other cheek.” What would that look like? Are we supposed to allow him to attack *other* innocent people, to fly *more* planes into buildings? What would happen if we gave money to *every transient* who came through our doors? And everyone knows that divine perfection is impossible, except for one.

***What do we do with this passage?***

We could acknowledge that Jesus said it and then explain that he doesn’t literally mean what he says here.

We could outright ignore it.

Or we could wrestle with it. We could try it. We could acknowledge that the world is not pretty, that there is indeed evil and ugliness and pain. This is something we don’t like to talk about, especially in church, but it’s true: we have personal and spiritual enemies.

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A friend in S.C. moved into a new home within her small town over the summer. Her new across-the-street neighbors mentioned that they were looking for a new church. They told her that *their* church was not particularly friendly, that there were cliques and gossipmongers and a lot of judging. (Imagine that.)

My friend invited the across-the-street neighbors to her church. Her adult Sunday School class that week had scheduled a well-known national speaker and the plan was that the neighbors would go to that class with my friend’s husband while my friend taught the first graders, and then they’d all meet for worship at 11:00.

So off they all went on a gorgeous summer morning in hopes of finding church full of open arms with people who spoke only encouraging words.

The speaker was a bestselling author. But on *this* day, he started out by saying that he was going to read excerpts from a book he didn’t write, a book that had changed his life.

(It wasn’t a Bible.) It was the autobiography of a woman who suffered with serious depression.

“I’m not going to edit her language,” he warned. And he said that some of her words were raw if not vulgar. And then he proceeded to read large excerpts of the book to that roomful of straight-laced Christians with epithets that have most likely never been heard in a church building before.

There were stories of blood and guts, lots of swearing – the most *colorful* words – lots of crudeness. And in the end, the speaker disclosed that he, himself, suffered with depression and that this woman was telling a story that he could have written as well.

My friend’s husband was not personally offended by anything he heard that morning. (His favorite television show is *The Sopranos*.) But he was a little worried about the across-the-street neighbors.

When they all met for worship in the sanctuary, my unsuspecting friend asked with great perkiness, “So . . . how was class? Isn’t that speaker great?!” to which Mr. Neighbor said, “Well, it was . . . *interesting*.” Mrs. Neighbor didn’t say a word.

It wasn’t until after they said good-bye to the neighbors and each returned to their own homes that my friend heard the details of the class. She was horrified. So much for making a good impression with the new neighbors! So much for getting them back to *her* church.

It took another day for her to get up the nerve to phone the new neighbors, but the next day, she called the woman across the street and apologized for what had happened in Sunday School. “I had no idea he would be so offensive,” she said. “I’m so sorry. That kind of thing has never before happened in our church.”

The woman across the street listened to my sister and was quiet for a moment and then said, “Actually . . . I thought it was refreshing. Mental illness is ugly. Sin is ugly. I know something about those things, and if we can’t talk about them in church, where can we talk about them?”

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We are used to hearing people offer up platitudes and false piety in religious circles. *Of course* we should love God and our neighbors. Who can argue with that?

But Jesus spoke words that were meant to shock us and make us uncomfortable, words that make us want to choke if we take them seriously, if we take Jesus seriously. Jesus wants us to deal with real life. And real life is not always pretty.

Jesus turns the world on its head. “You have *heard* it said,” he begins. But Jesus offers a new word: “But *I* say . . . be different from the world.”

Jesus didn’t just *speak* shocking words. He *lived* that word. And obeying God not only became messy business for him. It took his life.

We are weak disciples, *feeble Christians* if we are not willing to at least try to love our enemies, if we cannot at least have perfect *moments* when we are doing exactly what Jesus tells us to do.

If we think of Christianity as a neat and easy faith, then we are mistaken. Following Jesus involves loose ends and unanswered questions and heartbreaking moments. But here is the astonishing thing: we find peace in spite of the world's messiness because we come to a point where we realize that we are utterly dependent upon God. We, ourselves, cannot fix everything. We cannot know all the answers. We cannot prevent death and sorrow. We cannot make ourselves love our enemies. **Only God can work these wonders deep inside us.**

We can turn to this God who speaks of love even for our enemies, this God who calls us his children, the One who sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous alike.

This *God of love*, this *perfect God* is the only answer for a world where we can't be sure who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, in a world where the hostility between political parties is so nasty, where children are used as tools of terrorism. It is a messy, cruel world. But in the midst of this world, Jesus entered into the mess and spoke of love, not just for our friends, not just for our brothers and sisters but even for the most despicable among us.

For first century people, the tax collectors and Gentiles rated among the worst excuses for human beings.

For *21<sup>st</sup>* century people, we have al Qaeda, we have devious Democrats (if you are a Republican) or devious Republicans (if you are a Democrat). Maybe you have a hard time with certain races or certain ages or certain religious adherents or certain sexual orientations. Maybe you don't like people who swear, especially if they swear in church. Maybe you don't like people who chew gum in public. Maybe you don't like people who work for telemarketing companies.

**Jesus is telling us to love them all**, to pray for them. It's messy, difficult business. The only way we can really do it is by God's grace and with God's help. But imagine if we all tried.

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In closing, I know a minister who refuses to hold babies for baptisms. While the parents hold their children, he throws some water their way, says a quick prayer and that's that.

At first it was believed that he had a back problem and it physically impossible for him to hold even a tiny baby. But someone recently asked this pastor why he didn't hold babies during their baptisms and he explained that it was just too messy. He didn't like the squirming. He didn't like fussing with frilly baptism clothes. He was squeamish about drool and tears, much less other bodily functions that might present themselves.

I wonder how he might baptize two pre-schoolers who will probably chat and fidget throughout the whole sacrament.<sup>2</sup> I have to believe that *Jesus* would simply love them.

Jesus – as well as anyone – knew that life is not a neat and stress-free endeavor. He acknowledges here that there is revenge and poverty, that we have enemies and prejudices, that life is not perfect and we are not perfect. But we are commanded to try. We are commanded to love – even our enemies. Jesus is not kidding here. This is not optional.

If we say we *can't even try*, then we are just like the first century tax collectors and infidels. If we try to love our enemies and we succeed, it is only by the grace of God.

Now more than ever, God calls us to love. Now more than ever, ***the world needs requires that we love each other***, in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Today we baptized two theologically exuberant preschoolers -- Brian and Michael.