

Sermon for Epiphany 7A  
Sunday, February 19, 2017  
“Perfect disciples”

Text: Matthew 5:38-48

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are now in the fourth week of our trek through the Sermon on the Mount, and we have found that Jesus, like any good preacher, gets more specific each week. Jesus gets more specific as to what it means to be a disciple and what good discipleship looks like. Last week, the specifics seemed pretty extreme—gouging out eyes and cutting off hands if either caused a person to sin. If we actually followed those directives, we’d all be bumping into each other from our blindness and clubbing each other with whatever stumps were left of our arms. We know that Jesus was trying to get his audience’s attention to make a point about being responsible and accountable.

But today’s examples are quite different. Today’s sermon examples are practical, useful; they are things that we can actually do, starting right now. Again, like any good preacher, Jesus brings his message down to a level that we can relate to and incorporate into our very lives. The problem is, what Jesus tells us we should be doing feels unnatural. It feels counterintuitive. It feels countercultural. And it is. That’s just the point—if we are to be good disciples of God, the Most High, then we will be doing something that goes beyond the expectations of the people and cultures of the world around us. That’s not unusual, really. Judaism was already like that; Jews were already called into a covenant with God by requiring circumcision of their boys and men, adopting particular food restrictions, and performing various rituals at the temple. Now Jesus takes the Law to another level. It wasn’t good enough to follow the rules of the Torah—the laws given in the first five books of the Bible. Jesus gave his hearers some practical advice that we could all follow easily. “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. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Give to the poor. Love, not just your neighbor, but your enemy as well.

Those things aren't easy to do. Those suggestions make us uncomfortable. I remember as a kid, being taught, "if someone hits you, you hit them back." "If someone tries to take your stuff, you stand up for yourself and defend your possessions and your honor." Those are the things that make sense, because they declare that we are each a person who deserves proper respect. Don't disrespect me! But, you see, Jesus's advice is all about respect. It is easy for us to respect the people whom we like, the people who treat us right—our friends, our colleagues, the family members we get along with. But what about the people we fear, the people who threaten us, the people who actually do us harm? How hard it is to give proper respect to the people who don't just get under our skin, but don't honor us for the color of our skin. And that's the challenge that Jesus in his sermon calls us to do. He is telling us to do more than what is expected—to be more than we think we should be.

With the many tensions that plague our world and make the news these days, we see a lot of situations where our society and those in the world refuse to love those whom they perceive to be their enemy. Who is the enemy? Gosh, where would I start? You know who they are. I don't even need to recite the list of the enemies that our nation and our world want to demonize; you just have to look at the issues and people that we struggle with: women's rights, immigrants rights, gay rights, Black Lives Matter, an individual's right to health care, ISIS, Russia, white supremacists. Those are the easy enemies. But the people we encounter every day are also those we struggle with: our families, our friends, our coworkers, anyone we're having trouble with in our lives.

But, see, Jesus was always about respect. Jesus was always preaching a message that respected the dignity of every person. This was nothing new; just look at the first reading for this morning from Leviticus, in which God told Moses to tell the people that they must be holy, for the Lord their God is holy. Don't waste your harvest; give some to the poor and the alien. Don't steal, don't deal falsely with others, don't lie to anyone. "But you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." So you see, Jesus was simply reinforcing what God already expected of his people. The words of Jesus are simply reinforcing what God expects of us. Because being a good disciple isn't just about how we react, it's about how we act in the first place. If we are acting in a way that shows that we believe the words of Paul to the Corinthians, "Do you not know

that you are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person."

It's not for us to judge. It's not for us to enact divine justice. It is for us to be loving and respectful to each other, because we are each temples of God. Even if you don't respect your own temple, I should respect your temple. If we all did that, the world would be a much happier place. If we all did that, the world would be a much more peaceful place. If others see us loving those whom others reject, if others see us respecting those who even disrespect us, hopefully that will change them. Hopefully that will impress on them that they should do the same. I think that's what Jesus was trying to get at.

We should, as Jesus suggested, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Easy for him to say, huh? But that should be what we strive for—it should be our struggle—a struggle that is unachievable without God's supreme and divine aid. That perfection comes in love. The only way we can come close to being perfect disciples is to keep trying—to be persistent. So, I conclude with the collect that began our mass today:

**[I]** O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

**[II]** O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing; Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

### Resources

Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on Matthew 5:38-48" in [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3158](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3158)

Karoline Lewis, "Be Perfect" in <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4818>