

Love Outrageously

Matthew 5: 38-48

Preached February 19, 2012

You parents of young children -- how many times a week do you have the "it's not fair" conversation? You know the one I mean. "It's not fair that my brother has a friend coming over and I don't!" "It's not fair that Sarah has more American Girl dolls than I do!" "It's not fair that Chris is spending vacation week at Disney World I'm stuck here at home!" Even though it has been years, I so clearly remember my response to one of those conversations -- this was perhaps not my golden parenting moment. Utterly fed up, I turned to my son and said (okay, perhaps I shouted), "You're right! Life isn't fair! It's not fair that you have two parents who love you and some kids don't. It's not fair that you have a roomful of toys and some kids make do with playing with sticks. It's not fair that you get to eat three good meals a day and some kids go to bed hungry every night. Life isn't fair."

Little kids say it all the time, "It's not fair!" We adults aren't too far behind them, and can end up sounding a lot like kids. It's not fair that I work harder than you do but you got the promotion. It's not fair that I studied harder but you got the better grade. It's not fair that you look so much better than I do. It's not fair that you have five grandchildren and I have none. It's not fair that ... you fill in the blank. Less often do we find ourselves outraged because we're more popular, our health is better, our children more successful, our nation more prosperous than someone else's. In today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tackles this attitude head-on. I asked Leann to read today from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's modern paraphrase of the Bible, because his vivid language makes for good reading. But you might find it helpful to open up the pew Bible to this text while I preach; you'll find today's passage on page 786.

Jesus starts off by quoting Moses, as part of his on-going commentary on the law. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" This saying appears three times in the Old Testament (Exodus 21: 22-25; Leviticus 24: 19-20; Deuteronomy 19: 21) and also in the even more ancient Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. As the context in the Deuteronomy citing makes clear, this directive was given to judges for settling civil disputes; a judge was not supposed to exact a penalty disproportionate to the damage done. You back your car into my car in the parking lot, and you don't get your house burned down as justice. By Jesus' day, the penalties applied were usually fines, not actual bodily harm. But this guideline which was intended to limit retribution and eliminate family vendettas, had become an excuse for personal retaliation. Jesus, who is busy calling us to a righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, a righteousness greater than mere external conformity to the rules, a righteousness which springs from an inward desire to live a life wholly pleasing to God ... Jesus calls us to forget "fair," to forget "getting even" and to instead defy expectations, to love outrageously. Jesus goes on to give us four illustrations of the sort of thing he means.

Someone slaps you on the right cheek; a gesture of contempt in Jesus' world. If you were challenging an equal, you'd slap them on the left cheek; but if you wanted to insult someone, you'd slap them on the right cheek. Are you mad? You bet you are! What do you do? Punch out their lights? No, says Jesus, you offer your other cheek. You don't let them win by responding out of your gut, by retaliating. You don't even insist on fair treatment. Instead, you defy expectations, you love outrageously.

Second illustration. Someone sues you for your tunic. Do you take umbrage and counter-sue him? No, Jesus says. He wants your tunic, offer him your cloak as well. "This isn't fair!", we protest, and most of us have closets which could afford to go on a diet. A tunic was an inner garment and most people owned more than one. But a cloak – that was your protection against the winter winds; a coat by day and a blanket by night. An ordinary person would only own one. The Law of Moses considered a poor man's cloak an inalienable possession. In Exodus 22: 26-27 we read, "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate." Jesus tells his followers to break the cycle of hate, to defy expectations, to love outrageously.

Third illustration. You're walking along the road, trudging off to the fields for a day's labor or scurrying to your friend's house to share some news, and a soldier stops you in your tracks and presses you into service. Under Roman rule, soldiers could conscript civilians to carry loads for up to 1,000 paces. But no more than that. The Romans successfully ruled far-flung places for years in part because their rules weren't overly harsh. Put yourself in that situation. You're minding your own business, pursuing your own plans, and you get stopped by a soldier and are required to help him. (This is how Simon from Cyrene ends up carrying Jesus' cross bar.) It doesn't matter how eager you are to get on with your day or how much your knee hurts this morning, you're in an occupied country and have no choice in the matter. So you do what you're told, but how do you do it? Grumbling under your breath, muttering curses against those Romans, maintaining a stony silence, contempt oozing out of every pore of your skin, shouting "this is unfair!" with your body language? No, Jesus says. You carry the load the required distance and then you offer to carry it further. You defy expectations, you love outrageously.

Last illustration. "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Jesus is reaching right into our wallets. He's a meddling sort of guy. Following him is costly.

Jesus goes on. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" Hate the one who insults you, who sues you, who forces you into unwanted labor, who hits you up for money... We recognize that, don't we? A few years ago I saw the Jodi Foster movie, *The Brave One* -- perhaps you remember it. It's a thriller about a woman who responds to her fiancé's brutal murder by becoming a vigilante, wiping out bad guys. You're brought along with her as she wrestles with the ethics of what's she doing, but by the final scene, when she confronts the men who

harmed her, your heart rate is up, your adrenaline is flowing, and you want her to win. That's natural. Jesus teaches us to respond unnaturally; to defy expectations, to love outrageously. This quote he uses is an interesting one, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." This may be a familiar saying to his hearers, but only half of it is from the Old Testament. The Old Testament teaches us to love our neighbors and it also instructs us to return to our enemy his ox if we find it going astray, to help him lift up his beast of burden if it has collapsed under its load. (Exodus 23: 4,5) Hating our enemies comes naturally to us, and how much more naturally to a group of people living in an occupied land, awaiting a Messiah whom they expect to deliver them from Roman rule. Jesus is probably making you uncomfortable, but imagine how disconcerting his words are to those hoping he will lead an insurrection.

The revolution Jesus is leading has nothing to do with swords or hate. Instead, he tells his followers, those whose purpose is to be salt and light, he tells them to turn things upside down by defying expectations, by loving outrageously. After all, he says, if all you do is love your friends, you're not doing anything special. You're to imitate the God whose sun warms the good and bad alike, who waters the crops of the good and bad alike. "Love your neighbor and pray for those who persecute you." Not, I don't think, prayers that they will perish painfully, but prayers that see them as people made by God and loved by him.

Well, you might be thinking, sometimes this "works." Sometimes when we defy expectations, it disarms our adversary. I have a friend who is a social worker in Detroit. One evening, as she left her office, she was held up in the parking lot. Instead of resisting or screaming or running, she engaged the robber in conversation. By the time they were through talking, he had given up on robbing her and had agreed to take part in one of the programs her agency ran. Our soft words can deflect an argument, our generosity can crumble someone's hostility, but it's not always that neat, is it? Sometimes turning the other cheek or walking the extra mile just leaves us hurt and tired and our adversary gloating. Jesus warned his friends not to expect better treatment than he got, and he spent some time on a cross before his resurrection. Jesus doesn't tell us to defy expectations and love outrageously because it will always turn things around and make enemies into friends; he says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." So that you will look like the One whose name you bear.

As we've seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is deeply concerned with our motives and attitudes. He stands in opposition to those of his contemporaries whose approach to the Law is to find out how close to breaking it they can safely get. When is killing murder? When can I get divorced? When is an oath binding? Whom can I hate? Instead of indulging in those conversations, Jesus calls us to become people who live to please God fully; to be those who pursue reconciliation with others, who maintain purity and faithfulness in marriage, to be those whose word is completely trustworthy, and who defy expectations by loving their opponents. To make his point, Jesus uses hyperbole and exaggeration throughout his teaching: leave your gift at the altar in Jerusalem and run home to Galilee (a three-day journey) to make peace with your neighbor before you

offer your sacrifice; gouge out your eye if you find yourself lusting after someone; give money to every person who asks for it, no questions asked. Jesus isn't writing a new set of rules, to be anxiously obeyed. Rather, he is making a point: if you are asking yourself how much do I need to do to be okay with God, you're not thinking like a child of God. Your motives are askew, your attitude is out of kilter. Rather, you should be asking God this: how can I fully please you, who loves me beyond measure? How can I be salt and light in every circumstance which comes my way?

Getting even and taking revenge are to be no part of Jesus' followers way of life. Neither personal inconvenience nor cost is to keep us from defying expectations and loving others outrageously. But we are to love others, not enable their bad behavior or addictions. We are to love others, not become silent by-standers to their crimes. Jesus isn't telling you to not report your neighbor who is abusing his children nor, do I think, are you required to give your money to a known con artist, just because he asks.

I think Paul sheds some light on this over in Romans. In Romans 12 he says much the same thing Jesus says here in Matthew about personal non-retaliation, ending his teaching with the words, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Then, in chapter 13 he moves on to talk about the state as God's servant to bring wrongdoers to justice and keep peace in the land. As citizens of the state it sometimes falls to us to help bring criminals to justice so that others will not be endangered by them. Although we are to hold on to our own rights with a loose hand, we are to be concerned about the rights of others, especially those more vulnerable than ourselves.

How can we possibly live up to this high standard? What Jesus asks of us isn't natural at all. It's not just be nice and do good, which we might be able to manage on our better days. But this stuff Jesus calls us to, we won't do this without the help of God. We won't even *want* to live this life without the on-going work of God in us. It will just seem like an impossible burden apart from a deeply internalized understanding of the love of God and a Spirit-born passion to be part of what God wants to do in this world. So if you're feeling overwhelmed by this Sermon on the Mount, don't waste your time beating up on yourself or complaining to God. Instead, run to God and ask for help. Ask God to change your motives, your desires, your perspective. Ask God to so fill you with his Spirit that you want the life He calls you to.