

The Calling to Pacifism

Matthew 5:38-48

February 27, 2011

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matthew 5:38-48 (NIV)

We are continuing to follow along with the Scripture readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for the year. There are two very important reasons for doing so. One, is to help us realize that we are not in this alone. That despite all the different Christian denominations, there is also a common unity among us as well, which is what the word “catholic” actually means. So as we go through the different Scripture on any given Sunday, it should be a reminder to us that at the same time, many other Christians from throughout the world are looking at the same readings. Another important reason for doing so, maybe even more important, is that it causes us to spend time on some of the difficult passages. Usually we skip over the more difficult ones, or the ones that challenge us, and more often than not we often go back to the same ones, which just reinforce what we already believe. The problem is that when we do that, we are really hindering the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work and limiting the potential for spiritual growth and transformation to take place. Our passages this morning are some difficult passages, as with many found in Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*. So difficult for many Christians, that they just skip over Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount* and say “oh, that doesn’t apply to us today, that’s for the kingdom to come.”

How many here this morning if asked the question, “are you a pacifist?” would emphatically raise your hand, yes? That’s interesting, because at the beginning of Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, in his list of “Beatitudes” or blessings he says, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons (and daughters) of God*” (Matthew 5:9).

The word “pacifist” comes from the Latin word “pacific(us)” which comes from two words in Latin: paci meaning peace and ficus meaning making. “Pacifist” = “Peacemaker.”

What does it really mean to be a “pacifist?” Ultimately “pacifism” is putting our complete trust in God.

But “pacifism” should not be confused with the word “passive,” in the sense that we never take any action or we just allow things to happen to us. Like someone staying in an abusive relationship because he or she doesn’t know what to do. That might be “passive” but it does not describe a “pacifist.”

Was Jesus a pacifist? I think the answer is clearly “yes!” But Jesus was not passive. In it’s interpretation today “pacifism” is defined as the belief that disputes should be settled by peaceful means and that war and violence (in all its forms) are unjustifiable.

“Christian Pacifism” is the theological and ethical position that any form of violence is incompatible with the Christian faith, which has often led to conscientious objection to war and military service.

The question from what seems to be the majority of “Christians” is “how can some Christians be pacifists?” The real question should be “why aren’t all Christians - who are supposed to be followers of Jesus, ‘the Prince of Peace’ - pacifists?”

You see, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, for those who have not put their faith in Jesus and been empowered by the Holy Spirit, there really is nothing about Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount* that makes sense. It is really about the separation of the two worlds, the two kingdoms. The kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. In his *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus is describing what life in the kingdom of God is supposed to look like.

As we have learned just within the past few weeks in our own community, with the murder of Tiffany Brown, and most likely Richard & Gladis Russell as well, we humans are capable of great evil and violence. Reflecting on that case I couldn’t help but think of Jesus as he approached the city of Jerusalem, the week leading into his last week here on earth:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it, and said, “if you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes.”
Luke 19:41-42 (NIV)

Do we see with kingdom of God eyes or do we see with our earthly, fleshly eyes?

I can still remember standing at Ground Zero just a few days after the towers collapsed, just trying to grasp the amount of destruction, and the loss of life. Surrounded by other policemen and firemen, many who were saying things like “we have to go get them,” “we need to go kill somebody.” And thinking to myself, is that really the answer? Who really is “them” and how do we go get them? How many lives have been lost in the ten years since we began that quest?

The prophet Isaiah from the Old Testament gives us the greatest picture of what life in the coming kingdom was supposed to look like.

*This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning the kingdom to come:
In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised about the hills, and all nations will stream to it.*

Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD. Isaiah 2:1-5 (NIV)

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. Isaiah 9:2-7 (NIV)

"O LORD, you will ordain peace for us." Isaiah 26:12 (ESV)

Isaiah also gave us a clear picture of what the Messiah's ministry was going to look like:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Isaiah 53:7-9 (NIV)

Isaiah prophesied the coming reign of God and clearly established that peace and non-resistance was to be one of the defining marks of the kingdom.

The Garden of Gethsemane was the climax to what Jesus' earthly ministry was all about. As he prayed to his Father, "Father, not my will, but your will be done." And then the ultimate betrayal by his own disciple, the handing over by Judas with a kiss. And Peter trying to defend his Lord with the sword. And Jesus' words:

"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" Matthew 26:52-53 (NIV)

If there was ever one who had the ability to overcome violence with violence, it was Jesus. All he needed to do was call on the Father. But that was not the Father's will.

Then as he appeared before Pontius Pilate Jesus said, *"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."* John 18:36 (NIV)

Next came the cross, which revealed the shocking sinfulness, evil and violence which mankind is capable of. Yet, at the cross Jesus forgave those who crucified him, demonstrating and embodying the way of forgiveness rather than revenge. The ultimate act of "overcoming evil with good."

"The witness is consistent and thorough: Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that peacemaking would be a key mark of the reign of God. Jesus taught, lived, and died the way of peacemaking, the way of deliverance from the vicious cycles of violence."

Kingdom Ethics by Glen H. Stassen & David P. Gushee, p. 158

The early church took the teaching of Jesus both very seriously and literally. Guided by the Holy Spirit they were strong pacifists. They did not identify with any earthly nation but claimed their citizenship to be heaven. They believed that the governments were given by God, and therefore to be obeyed, but only to the extent that it did not conflict with obeying God. The early Christians could not be soldiers or judges because it might place them in the position of having to take someone's life. For the first 300 years of the church, none of the Christian leaders approved of serving in the military for any person identifying himself as disciple of Jesus Christ.

"The divine banner and the human banner do not go together, nor the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil. Only without the sword can the Christian wage war: for the Lord has abolished the sword."
Tertullian, 160-220 A.D.

"You cannot demand military service of Christians any more than you can of priests. We do not go forth as soldiers."
Origen, 240 A.D.

Everything changed when Constantine became emperor in 313 A.D. and the church and government became mixed. And Christians throughout the centuries since have killed millions of people, just like those from all the other religions, all in the name of their government or their religion. So the question is: was the church that God calls the church to be, in its most original and authentic form, the church that existed for the first 300 years, or the 1,700 years since? The problem becomes very apparent when you have Christian fighting Christian.

Dr. Eberhard Arnold, founder of the Society of Brothers, began to question the wisdom of the Christian churches when he observed the results of World War I. He saw the German Christian soldiers killing and being killed by the enemy soldiers who also claimed to be Christian. And he asked "How could German Christian ministers and priests bless the German army and send them off to war, while at the very same time the enemies' Christian ministers and priests were blessing

their armies? How could one part of the body of Christ do evil to another part? To Dr. Arnold, this seemed very inconsistent with the teachings of the Jesus and the New Testament, which led him from the Reformed Church to a more Anabaptist understanding.

In the case of Germany, things didn't change much between WWI and WWII. I have just finished reading a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor who was martyred by Hitler. For German Christians they had a split loyalty. Most of them in fact, including many pastors, chose the loyalty to their country and served in the military. Even in the face of the atrocities which the nation was committing.

Bonhoeffer himself struggled early on, whether to support his country, his earthly homeland, but knew he couldn't serve in the military. Not because he was a "pacifist," but because he knew what was going on, the slaughter of the Jews - including many whom he knew personally.

Eventually Bonhoeffer would become part of a large group that conspired to assassinate Hitler, with one of the conspirator's setting off a bomb within yards of Hitler, killing others but missing the intended target. An act which would lead to the execution of almost all involved, including Bonhoeffer. The act would also lead Hitler to claim that his surviving was proof that God was on his side, and he just intensified his executions of the Jews. So, was Bonhoeffer truly a martyr for Christ? Some how I don't see Christ doing what he did. And interestingly, Hitler would take his own life just weeks after Bonhoeffer's execution, which just goes to show that God's plans and timing are different than our plans.

Jesus came to turn the whole world upside down. An "eye for an eye," "tooth for tooth," and "life for life," was part of the Old Testament Law. Otherwise known as *lex talionis*, or maybe even better "tit for tat." Basically it said whatever you do to me, I have the legal right to do it to you. But interestingly the law of *lex talionis* wasn't designed to increase punishment, it was designed to limit it. In early times when people lived in tribal society, if someone from one tribe took the life of someone from another tribe, it was the common belief that the tribe who was victim had the right to wipe out the other's entire tribe: men, women and children. The *lex talionis* was actually the beginning of mercy. But Jesus said that if we truly are his followers, then we need to go beyond that.

"Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Today we have no significance of that gesture. If someone is right handed, and someone is standing directly in front of you, how can you strike him in the right cheek? The only way to do it is with the back of your hand. According to Jewish tradition, to hit a man with the back of your hand was twice as insulting as to hit him with the front of your hand. So, what Jesus was saying is this: 'Even if someone should direct at you the most deadly and calculated insult you can think of, you must on no account retaliate or take revenge.'

And if someone wants to take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Again, we have no concept today what that meant back then. In Jesus' day the tunic was the inner garment, made of cotton or of linen. It would be like a men's shirt today. Most men had lots of tunics. The cloak on the other hand was the great big, blanket-like outer garment, usually made of wool, often used

to keep one warm during the day and used as a blanket at night. Unless you were very rich, you had only one cloak.

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Go the extra mile. Twice as much! If someone wants something, give it to them. Basically what Jesus was saying is that in His Kingdom nothing is really ours personally. It is for everyone. How different is that from who we are today, where what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours? A missionary couple from Brazil was once asked how they could live among the poorest of the world's poor without danger of being robbed, and they responded, "simple, you can't own anything anyone would want to steal." The same thing was said at the planning meeting last Sunday for the mission trip to Haiti in the fall. Don't take anything you don't want anybody else to have. Jesus was saying "my kingdom has nothing to do with what you own, what you have, what you possess. My kingdom is about what is in your heart."

Jesus builds on that, leading towards a crescendo, "*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons (and daughters) of your Father in heaven.*" Think of your worst enemy, the one who you despise the most. Not someone way out there. Not Saddam Hussein, or Osama Bin Ladin, or Adolph Hitler, or Sam Littleton. No, think of the one who has hurt you the most. Jesus says to love him or her and even pray to for him or her, that you may both become sons and daughters of your Father in heaven. Why? Because that is what God has done for you.

The crescendo. It is rather simple: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.*" Do you think Jesus would really say that if it wasn't possible? And for all of us "perfectionists" out there who have spent the good part of our lives trying to get there through our perfectionism - only to fall flat on our faces, Jesus must clearly be talking about something else here. The Greek word for "perfect" is "teleios." The word is often used in Greek in a very special way. It has nothing to do with what we might call perfection today.

A man who has reached full-grown stature is "teleios," as opposed to a half-grown youth. A student who has reached a mature knowledge of a subject, is "teleios," as opposed to one who is just beginning to learn the subject. In the Greek idea of "teleios" or "perfection," a thing is perfect when it fully reaches or realizes the purpose for which it was planned, designed, and made. Human beings are perfect if they achieve the purpose for which they were created and sent into the world.

And what were we created for? In Genesis 1:26 we find God saying, "Let us make man in our image after our likeness." Human beings were created to be like God. Not to be God, but to be "like God," which is best demonstrated in His Son, Jesus Christ. "Teleios," "Perfection," in v. 48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," means to love the same way that God loves. The same way that was revealed in His own Son, Jesus Christ. The same sacrificial, non-violent, non-retaliatory, always forgiving way.

As Christians, if Jesus truly is Lord of our lives, our attitude, our lives, everything we do should be the same as that of Christ:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)

A person whom is fit for a sacrifice to God, that person is “teleios,” in the eyes of God. As Christians, disciples of Jesus Christ, we are all called to “pacifism.” Is it easy? No. It wasn’t easy for Jesus as we read the story of the Garden of Gethsemane. It’s not something that comes naturally or instantaneously, which is why the title of my message is “The Calling to Pacifism.” What is “pacifism” exactly? Well it is more than just avoiding participating in war or violence. Most of us will not be asked to choose whether to join the military or not. But some of you will, and you need to know where you stand and why.

“Pacifism” is really about the giving up of ourselves, our own rights, our own wills, and trusting in the will of God. Trusting God that no matter what happens here on earth - illness, loss of a job, death of a loved one, cancer, loss of all our possessions, no matter what anybody may ever do to us, even our own death, trusting that God will raise us up.

Someone else wrote, “the faith required to be a ‘pacifist’ must provide the Christian with the assurance that God is in charge of all that happens.” If we cannot trust God, than we end up trusting in our own power, or the power of our government, or the military. We who call ourselves followers of Christ have placed our complete trust in God, even when things don’t turn out the way we hoped they would turn out.

By human thinking, Jesus’ death on the cross was a colossal failure. Christians practice pacifism not because it makes sense to the rest of the world. They do it out of obedience to their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Pacifism and non-resistance is right, not because it makes sense, but because it anticipates the triumph of the Lamb who was slain.

You see, we all have parts of our lives which we have not surrendered to the will of God. In two weeks we begin the season of Lent, which is really all about taking the time to examine ourselves in relation(ship) to Christ. Reflecting on the events of the last weeks of Jesus’ life here on earth. On the way to the cross! The complete surrender of his will to God’s will. Something which he calls each of us to do, in a culture and society which is all about accepting Jesus as Savior, but very few as Lord over their lives.

I would just like us to take a couple of minutes for us to pause and to reflect on our own lives. What part of our lives do we need to surrender to God. Not my will, but His will be done. Not because it is right by human standards, or it makes sense, but only because it anticipates the triumph of the Lamb who was slain.