

The Extra Mile
Matthew 5:21-48 (*passim*)
February 13, 2011

I.

Our reading from Matthew's Gospel today seems a little strong, doesn't it? It probably does not contain examples we would use to explain how the Bible can be encouraging and uplifting. And I imagine they are not the verses we would recite with our children as we put them to bed.

Even so, we cannot discount Jesus' words or explain them away. Unlike our options with a piece of meat, there is no tenderizer we can use to make this reading easier to chew.

But it is important to understand the context in which Jesus spoke, and his purpose in declaring these seemingly impossible standards of conduct for Christian believers.

And we might set the stage by thinking about a very important ministry here at St. Thomas. Four times a week, every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday at noon, there is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in our large Sunday School room next to my office.

I cannot hear what they say, but sometimes their laughter vibrates through the wall. And I can recognize the cadence of the Lord's Prayer as they say it together to conclude their gathering.

At those times I sometimes recall when I once accompanied a friend to an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to offer support. Toward the end of the meeting the leader announced it was time for progress pins to be distributed.

The first pins went to all who had been sober for thirty days. Then came pins for those sober for six months. After that, people who had been sober for one year received their pins. Then, with seriousness and solemnity, he said it was time for the most important pins of all. He asked anyone to come forward who had been sober for twenty-four hours.

A journey begins with a step. It continues as we live into the purpose of our destination. And today's Gospel illuminates some of the more serious and sobering aspects of that great adventure to which God calls us. We take comfort in what God has done for us. But it is a two-way street. Perhaps we have some addictions or habits that God wants us to change.

II.

As I worked on this sermon I thought of an old preacher who was cleaning out a closet and found four eggs and eight hundred dollars in his wife's things. He asked about it and she said she saved an egg for each bad sermon he had given. He said, "Four eggs in all those years. That's not bad. But what's the money for?" "Well," she replied, "whenever I got a dozen eggs, I sold them."

Hopefully, this sermon will not lay an egg, which might be possible because as we get into today's reading we will encounter some difficult ideas.

Today's Gospel is a central part of the Sermon on the Mount, which is one of the great discourses of Jesus in the Book of Matthew. It takes up three chapters, and probably has been studied and analyzed by scholars and theologians as much as any part of the New Testament; probably because of disagreements over what it all means.

Jesus said, for example, that we should not get angry, and that if someone strikes us we should turn the other cheek. Adultery is the thought as well as the deed. We are to love our enemies, and if someone takes our tunic we should give up our cloak as well. He said if our eye offends us, we should pluck it out, and if our hand offends us we should cut it off.

Because these teachings seem so strict, some people say they applied in biblical times, but do not guide us now. Others say that Jesus was speaking only to the disciples, but not to all the people. Still others claim that because the requirements are impossible to achieve, they serve to demonstrate how far short we fall rather than as standards actually to be obeyed.

Let's go through a few of these teachings to see if there are common ideas running through them. And we can begin by noting that nothing in today's Gospel directly relates to worship, prayer, spirituality, or the next life. Instead, it all deals with ethical and moral behavior in this life.

And we might peek at the ending first as we begin our analysis. In the last nine words of the reading, after speaking of all these foundations of Christian living, Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect."

Is that actually possible? It depends upon what Jesus meant by "perfect." We know we never will be free from sin. We confess our sins every week before communion. And St. Paul said in Romans, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one" (3:10). In First John we are told, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).

But Paul also said we are to aspire to perfection (2. Cor. 13:9), and we do so by clothing ourselves with love (Col. 3:14). Our journey toward perfection therefore rests within us. And we take that journey by serving God with our whole heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Now that sounds more familiar, doesn't, it? And in it is the common thread that runs through today's reading. Let's look at some of the examples.

III.

Jesus spoke of anger with a fellow Christian brother and sister. He called us to reconcile ourselves before we come to the altar. We cannot share the blessings of God's love when we don't share it with each other.

That is especially relevant as we come forward to receive communion. The bread and wine won't mean anything if we harbor pride, unrighteousness, or ill-will in our hearts toward others. First Corinthians tells us that whoever receives communion "in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (11:27).

And then, right after saying that everyone who even looks at a woman with lust commits adultery in his heart, Jesus said if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away. Jesus certainly did not intend to link those two things, did he? He certainly could not have been advocating self-mutilation. What was he talking about?

Well, I might stand here and tell you that it will not cost you an arm and a leg to get to heaven. And notice that I just used a metaphor about body parts in that last sentence. Jesus used the same kind of metaphorical image when he identified body parts with sin, and then said those body parts, those sins, must be cast away.

That's because sin comes from the heart and mind, not the eyes and hands. It comes from our attitudes, and our practices, and our habits that we know or suspect are wrong, but that we do anyway. These are the things that today's Gospel calls us to get rid of, to remove from ourselves and our lives. Jesus' language is symbolic, but the meaning is real.

Finally, in the last part of the reading Jesus grouped several examples together in the context of putting others first. And we have heard this idea before. In Mark's Gospel he said those who would be first also must be last (9:35), and elsewhere in Matthew he proclaimed that those who would be great also must be servants (23:11).

That's what's behind Jesus' command to turn the other cheek, and to give your coat as well as your shirt, and to go the extra mile. These sayings actually have found their way into modern culture as contemporary Christian practices. Jesus' words are not artifacts of a bygone era, but rather are at the foundations of civilized society.

And this leads to perhaps the hardest instruction of all in today's reading. Jesus said to love our enemies. After all, he pointed out, if we only love those who love us, then we aren't really making much of an effort. Anyone can do that.

But how does this work with people who do not love us and don't want our love? What about those who would reject our love if we offered it? How do we love terrorists, and violent criminals, and those without any sense of social responsibility who do evil in the world?

An answer has two parts. First, God does not ask us to take a passive view of evil. We are not expected to be sympathetic to wrongdoers or tell people it's all right to mistreat us. We can, however, pray for them. And we always are called to seek justice.

But God also tells us in today's reading and elsewhere that we cannot allow hatred, or anger, or emotion in our hearts to get in the way of our relationship with him. By telling us to love others who are not very lovable, God asks us to purge our hearts of feelings of ill-will that clog up our pipeline to him. Loving people who seem to be enemies means not letting them burden us.

The second part of the answer is more difficult. What do we do when the people we think are enemies also are our Christian brothers and sisters? That's a different story.

We must forgive them if they truly ask (Lk. 17:3), and we are called to extend ourselves to them as God does for us. First John tells us, "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (4:20).

IV.

So, even though today's Gospel might not seem so impossible once we study it, it still calls us to very high standards in our relationships with each other.

Jesus did not come to change our lives in minor ways. He did not live among us just to offer a few helpful hints about self-improvement. The kingdom of God is not just a simple little program to encourage people to be nicer to each other. And you don't create enemies who want to crucify you merely because you are suggesting a little change here, or a little change there.

No, Jesus was talking about a hugely different new world. He was revealing a new reality beyond the comprehension of most people at the time. Perhaps Jesus felt the need to use radical imagery or shocking language to get peoples' attention and make his point.

And that point was that God's kingdom is for the faithful, and faithful living requires effort. We know that obstacles will arise. Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things, and at times we can become attached to things in our lives that Jesus wants us to give up or do differently.

But we are not asked to do it alone. And we cannot do it in our own strength. The Holy Spirit will guide us, and the church is here as our companion.

It is a lot easier to live into today's reading when we do it together rather than when we try to do it alone. Jesus spoke to the disciples as a group, and he speaks to us today as a group. The Spirit led them, and the Spirit leads us. And together, as the Spirit goes before us, we can know God's grace and the way to a holy life. *Amen.*