

6 October 2019

Counter-Cultural Conflict

Matthew 5:38-48

Last night, at a special presentation here, Michelle Walter told a group of us about an experience she had had with “Restorative Justice.” The idea behind “restorative justice” is to bring criminal offenders face to face with those whom they had harmed and through that meeting for the offender to personally make what reparations are possible for him or her to make. Sometimes this is worked out as an alternative to prison. Other times it is a part of a rehabilitation process while in prison. Michelle’s experience was to meet face to face with the man who, while driving under the influence of heroin, hit and killed her sixteen-year-old son Nathan. I’d like to invite Michelle up to the front now.

[At this point, I asked Michelle a few questions about her experience, and she talked about what it meant to both her and to Tommy, the young man with whom she met. Michelle is an elementary school teacher, and Tommy had been one of her students over twenty years before. She told how she explained to him exactly what his actions had done to her family, and he expressed a remorse that he had not at the time of his sentencing. Nor, she added, would she have believed him at that time. She and Tommy met four years after Nathan’s death. Michelle did not speak of forgiveness, but she expressed her hopes for Tommy’s future. While in prison he has earned the trust of the guards, is permitted to work off-site during the day, has learned a new trade, and has a job waiting for him.]

Once again, in our sermon series on the counter-cultural teaching and example of Jesus, we find ourselves in the Sermon on the Mount. Today we read Matthew 5, verses 38-48:

³⁸You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

One of my seminary theology professors told this story. He had preached on this passage in a Baptist church in Texas, about loving our enemies. After the service, one gentleman from the church met him at the door, shook his hand, and said, “Love your enemies, huh? I don’t believe that.” I have to say I appreciate that man’s honesty. There are untold millions of Christians who also don’t believe this teaching of Christ, who have no intention of loving their enemies, who thrive on identifying the “enemies of Christ,” and attacking them, but there are few who will come right out and say, “I don’t believe this thing that Jesus said.” Usually we tie ourselves in

knots trying to explain how Jesus couldn't possible have meant what he said. This man at least was honest. There are some good things about Texas.

But even those of us who accept that Jesus meant exactly what he said, that he intended for us to follow this instruction, are at a loss as to how to go about it. We can't just turn off feelings of hatred and turn on love. It's not on a toggle switch. So telling us to love someone that we currently regard as an enemy is just frustrating. It's as frustrating as being told that we must forgive someone who has done great harm to us. Sure, that may be true, but knowing it doesn't make it happen, and that word "must" just makes us feel guilty that we can't do it. Some fifteen years ago a church member asked me for advice on how to forgive her late father, whom she remembered sexually abusing her throughout her childhood. I'm supposed to know how to do that because I'm a pastor? I don't. I got nothing.

But if we look a little earlier in this passage we do see one thing that Jesus tells us to do that *is* possible: turn the other cheek. When someone attacks you, keep your hands at your side and don't retaliate. In fact, do the same thing if they attack you again. When someone forces you to do something that you don't want to do, do everything you are told *and then some*. If someone takes something of yours, follow up their theft with a gift. I didn't say it was easy; I said it was *possible*. And the reason it's possible is because these are actions, not feelings. We have little control over our feelings, but we can control our actions. We choose how we respond to hostile, demeaning insults and assaults. And, whether we feel like it or not, we can choose to treat our assailant differently than he or she has treated us. Our attacker has treated us as someone unworthy of respect, as an object or a tool; we can respond by treating our attacker as a human being deserving of patience and respect.

And that's the key, I think, to loving your enemies, too. It is not suddenly having feelings of love for a person you regard as an enemy. It is simply choosing to treat that person as a human like you. This person is beloved of God. We can't change how we feel, but we can change how we act and how we think, and if we think of a person as a child of God, like us, then eventually – over years or even decades – perhaps our feelings will change, too. To use a concrete example: do what Michelle Walter did. Michelle sat for five hours across a table from the man whose choices and addiction had robbed her of her beloved son. All the years she had spent raising the young man who was Nathan, and all the future years she had to look forward to with him, had been taken from her. What did she do to the man responsible? She gave him some more of her time. She treated him as a human being. Is this forgiveness? I don't know. Is it love? It wouldn't be for me. But it is this much at least: she refused to deny his humanity in hatred and retribution. Tommy is a person to her. She knows his name, knows his story, she has hopes for his future, and when she told us last night about his progress in prison, she spoke with pride. She cares about Tommy.

One of our problems with the whole forgiveness and love your enemy business is that too often we picture it as a yes or no vote. Do we forgive or not? Do we love or not? It's never like that. When we forgive at all, it is usually in stages. Today, maybe we forgive 15% and that's the best we can do. And maybe we'll never get to 100%, and maybe that's not the goal. Maybe the goal is to treat the "Other" as human – someone who is loved by God, and who therefore may be loved by God's children. Maybe even us.

We live in an age of dehumanizing enemies. We live in a time when college protesters label those who disagree with them "Nazis" and are promptly dismissed in turn by conservatives

as “snowflakes.” We don’t listen to our opponents; we put them in boxes, because boxes can be tossed out. Public discourse has been replaced by name-calling, partly under the influence of our name-caller in chief, but the sickness is society-wide. If there was ever a time for Christians to be counter-cultural, it is now. Jesus taught us to treat all people – even those who differ from us, even those who have hurt us – and then he lived his life in such a way as to show us what that looks like.

This is probably the hardest thing Jesus ever asked us to do: to refuse to retaliate and to try to understand those who hurt us. Even if – as he suggests – they take our non-retaliation as a sign of weakness and hurt us again. This doesn’t mean not to protect ourselves. Don’t stay with that abusive partner; get out and get a restraining order. But don’t become like them. Don’t strike back in fury, even if fury is what you feel. Instead, pray for them – from a distance, but pray. And if we can do that, we will surely stand out in our generation as lights in the darkness. It will be hard, and in 21st century America it will be super-weird.

But it will be what Jesus said to do.