

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
February 23, 2014  
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Leviticus 19:1-18  
Psalm 71:16-24  
I Corinthians 3:10-23  
Matthew 5:38-48

In today's Gospel lesson, we find ourselves in the portion of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* where things are "heating up" and getting very interesting.

In the early chapters of this Gospel, Matthew has presented Jesus as a "kingly" figure. His birth caused great stress for Herod and other earthly rulers, and his subsequent preaching and ministry has attracted what amounts to a ready-made army of the masses. People are starting to believe that Jesus may indeed be the one who has come to restore the throne of David, the One to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth.

And here we sit today, many years later. If I took a poll and asked everyone who believes that Jesus is a "king" to stand, I suspect that the majority of folks in this room would rise to your feet.

And if I took another poll and asked those who desire to *enter* Jesus' kingdom and to be a part of it to stand, I suspect again that most people in this room would do so.

I think it is a fair assumption that you are here this morning not because you like the sound of my voice or the aesthetics of the sanctuary, but *because you believe that Jesus is the King and you desire to be part of his kingdom.*

If that is true – and I believe that it is – then **I am about to speak to you some of the most challenging words that you will ever hear.** Words that may call into question your understanding of God’s kingdom. Words that may force you to look deep within, and ask yourself how serious you are about entering that kingdom.

We find ourselves this morning up on the mountain side with Jesus and the crowd that is gathered with him. For we share with them the belief that Jesus is a king, and we share their desire to be part of that kingdom. And in this part of the sermon, Jesus describes his vision of God’s kingdom, and issues a summons to those who desire to be a part of it.

And the problem is this: *almost every single human impulse that we have as human beings bristles against what Jesus calls for in this text.*

Love your enemies? Are you serious? Turn the other cheek? Pray for those who persecute you? Are you out of your mind?

Let’s be truthful for a moment. Most of us, if we were honest, would respond to Jesus’ words here by saying something like this: *a nice ideal, but crazy to try to implement in the “real” world.* In the real world, the world in which we

live, turning the other cheek and returning hatred with love is not the way to get ahead.

But Jesus forges ahead. He calls the prevailing spirit of this world into question by *commanding an entirely different way for us to relate to one another.*

**Jesus calls people into relationships governed not by power, but by vulnerability grounded in love.** In Jesus' kingdom, the foundation upon which all is built is the force of *forbearing love*. And there are two specific situations where forbearing love is most compellingly on display. Let's look at the text.

The first situation where forbearing love shows itself is when you are wronged or injured.

Jesus begins with the Old Testament part of the law known as the *lex talionis*, which stipulated “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” The design behind the *lex talionis* was not so that an injured person could get his “pound of flesh.” The purpose behind it was to limit the cycle of violence in society, and to ensure that punishments were proportionate to crimes.

In worst cases, the *lex talionis* was interpreted as sanctioning retribution against those who had caused harm to another. But Jesus says “no” to that. As Ghandi said many years ago: “an eye for an eye eventually renders all people blind.”

So, Jesus says, “if someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.” In the realm where Jesus is king, followers of Jesus Christ do not return violence with violence. We do not respond to hatred with more hatred. Most importantly, *we do not attempt to defeat power by exerting our own, stronger power.* For strength eventually fails. Power eventually corrupts. **Love alone transforms. Forbearing love alone has the power to redeem and to create new life.**

As an example, Jesus says to his hearers that if a soldier asks them to carry his gear for a mile, they are to carry it for two miles. Remember, Jesus is speaking here to people who are oppressed by a foreign government whose soldiers occupy the land. These soldiers could (and did) conscript you to carry gear or do anything else at a moment’s notice. They usually did so in brutal, demeaning ways.

How does forbearing love respond to that? When the soldier says, “that’s enough, you can stop here,” forbearing love says, “I will go on a little further.”

A second way forbearing love manifests itself here has to do with our relationships with our enemies. In verse 43, Jesus makes reference to the Old Testament book of Leviticus. The portion of the book we heard this morning is where God sets out clear guidelines for how the people are to relate to one another, and to care for the neighbor.

I did some checking this week, and discovered that there is not one single instance in the Old Testament where it says, “love your neighbor, hate your enemy.” Not one. What Jesus must be addressing here is some sort of oral tradition that had built up around the law, and had taken hold.

At any rate, in the kingdom that Jesus leads, people respond to their enemies not with hatred and animosity, but with *love*. And it’s not a passive love, either. It’s a love that *prays for those who are enemies and persecutors*. This kind of forbearing love is what sees anger result in *reconciliation* rather than *retaliation*. It makes it possible for enemies to be overcome by *love* rather than *violence*.

Finally, Jesus summarizes this entire discussion on forbearing love in verse 48, where he says: “you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

We’ve talked in the past about this word “perfect,” which in the Greek is *telos*. Let’s start by reminding ourselves what the word *does not* mean. It does not mean some kind of moral perfection, a sinless life incapable of growth or improvement.

The word *telos* means “goal, end, or desired outcome.” In the New Testament, a thing is “perfect” when it reaches or attains the end for which it was made. (E.g., a chalice)

You and I were made by a Creator God whose love is all-consuming, impartial, and unconditional. God's love is a *forbearing love* that is especially poured out upon those who would reject that love and even violently oppose God's loving purpose for them.

For those who would make it their aim to join up with Jesus, to be a part of his kingdom, they now have a clearer picture of what that kingdom is like. It is a realm defined by *relationships*, and where those relationships are shaped by *forbearing love*, a love demonstrated most tangibly to those who are different from us, and who may even hate us and wish us harm.

It would be so easy at this point to retreat back into the notion that Jesus' words here form a grand *ideal* toward which to aim, but are impossible to live in the "real" world. But we have witnessed in our lifetime moments when Jesus' words have been anything but idealistic, moments when *forbearing love* walked the streets of our cities in persons such as Ghandi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela.

And for all who respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him, he grants them his gracious empowerment. He not only commands something *of* us, but he commends something *in* us. He knows that *we* know that deep in our hearts we have more to give, that we desire to be more than we have settled for. And so, by his grace, he takes us by the hand and leads us on this journey where we learn to

love as we are loved, we learn to forgive as we've been forgiven, where we "grow up" toward the purpose for which we have been made.

As you come to the table of the Lord this morning, come with thanksgiving. In the bread and the wine, hear the voice of Jesus saying to you: "I love you with the Father's love, and I impart that same love to you. Receive it. Share it. Live it."

Then rise up and go in peace, grateful you have been counted worthy of the kingdom.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.