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AMDG

Epiphany 7A - February 19, 2017

And Jesus said:

You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, give your opponent back twice what they gave to you. If they take your coat, burn their house down. Don’t let anyone get the best of you. Get them before they get you.

You have heard it said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” And, I say to you, Right on! And, if your neighbor does you wrong, then he is your enemy. Go after him with a vengeance. Be ordinary, because your perfect heavenly Father really doesn’t expect very much of you, anyway.

What do you think? Are these ideas easier to accept than what we heard in the readings today? Of all the teachings in scripture, these are the ones we’d like to ignore - those that describe God’s extravagant love and compel us to emulate that love.

And, I can’t imagine that the people hearing this directly from Jesus felt much differently. The Gospel of Matthew was written for second generation Christians who were very Jewish. The defining event of their lives was the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70AD. Imagine how they must have felt hearing these words - love your enemies.

But the teachings emphasizing God’s unconditional love, and our responsibility to imitate that love, cannot be ignored. They are a thread woven throughout scripture and imbedded deep in our hearts. Your discomfort at my proclaiming the opposite just underlines that. There’s something inside of us that says, “Yes,” when we hear these commands, but then we sigh with discouragement.

Perhaps we wouldn’t feel so discouraged, if it wasn’t for those last words, “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” As Americans, when we hear the word perfect, we automatically think of things that are without error or blemish. Our minds jump to a goal perfectly attained.

And, when it comes to forgiving those who harm us and loving our enemies? ...We become overwhelmed by a goal that seems unattainable. Our American understanding of perfectionism is not what was intended here. The Greek word is *telios*; and in the ancient world it could mean whole, complete, or even mature. Other times in the bible when *telios* is used, it compares an adult with a child. The adult is *telios* whereas the child is becoming *telios*. So it's not a perfect outcome that's referenced here, but a process of continuous growth or improvement. This means that God's qualities - boundless mercy, extravagant generosity, unconditional love - are qualities we need to work toward continuously. Our focus should be on the process, not the outcome. We leave the outcome up to God.

It's a characteristic of our human frailty that when we hear "love your enemies" and "give to all who ask of you" our minds immediately go to the extreme. And when we can't imagine ourselves loving a member of ISIS for example, we just throw in the towel. That's how we become stuck in attitudes and behaviors that prevent us from doing God's will. Instead of allowing ourselves to be derailed by seemingly impossible goals, our lives can provide daily opportunities for spiritual growth - opportunities to work toward unconditional love and forgiveness. This is the essence of the God life. It is repentance, a fundamental change in thinking and living, to which God calls each of us. Engaging in this new way of life is the necessary ingredient in accomplishing God's plan for salvation in us and in the world - being committed to a continuous process of uncovering, confronting, and releasing the attitudes and behaviors that get in the way of doing God's will. To engage in this process, we first have to admit that our ways of thinking and behaving are inconsistent with God's ideal. The commandments to love our enemies, give generously, and forgive unconditionally do apply to us. We can't fool ourselves about that. These extraordinary commands apply to us, no exceptions. To say there are is to deny God's perfect love. They are what God intends for us. Rejecting them is sin and death.

What we can do is honestly assess where we are. Be willing to admit, "I'm not ready to love my enemy yet. I'm too angry. I hate my enemy. I'm not ready to welcome the stranger. I'm afraid of people who aren't

like me. I don't want to help the poor. I judge them and think they're lazy.” It may be enough at first to simply be honest about ways of thinking and acting that are inconsistent with God’s love, and admitting that we’re not ready to change. God loves it when we're honest about our feelings.

When we become aware of the attitudes and behaviors that do not match God’s ideal, and can name them honestly and without judgment, we become willing to change. And then we can begin releasing these harmful patterns. Let’s take a simple example - someone driving slowly in the left lane of the freeway. When I’m engaged in the God life, I notice my attitudes and behaviors. “Here I am being impatient and judgmental, and I know that's not how you see me, Lord. I want to do your will. Please remove these defects of character which stand in the way of my usefulness to you and others.” If we find ourselves having to let go of the same behaviors again and again, we might reflect a little bit, and ask, “What is it that makes me hold on to the need to get ahead of people on the freeway or to judge people who don’t follow the rules? Why does this regularly upset me so much?” As we are given insight into the deeper fears or resentments that motivate our behaviors, it may be helpful to share them with someone else, a priest for example, and pray to have God remove those fears and resentments. You may ask, how does driving more courteously result in me loving my enemies? Once again, it’s about the process not the outcome. As we re-pattern our lives into a process of uncovering, confronting and releasing attitudes and behaviors inconsistent with God’s love, then we truly live out “Thy will be done.” We are gradually reshaped into the extravagantly loving people God intends us to be by trusting God’s will for us and by letting go of harmful coping mechanisms.

As you practice this prayerful way of living, noticing bad attitudes and behaviors, confronting them honestly, and releasing them, you might become discouraged at how often you seem to be going through this process, “I’m such a failure. It seems like I have to release bad attitudes ten thousand times a day,” This is a time to gently remind yourself that these are 10,000 times you are returning to God. Ten thousand times you are inviting God to help you conform to God’s will. Again, it’s all about the process. Leave the results to God. As you practice this way of living,

over time you will begin to see remarkable changes. The fruits of the Holy Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - will begin to appear in your lives.

My brothers and sisters, even if we might not see our selves that way, God sees us as holy just like God is holy, God sees us as instruments of his perfect love. Isn't it amazing that we have that capacity within us? But, it's impossible, in and of ourselves, to love our enemies, to give without counting the cost, to love unconditionally. It is through the working of the Holy Spirit, that this is accomplished in us. It is the great mystery of our faith that as we die to self, letting go of self-reliance, anger, resentment and fear, we become more and more of what God intended us to be - we are transformed into God's Christ in the world.