



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Grow Up

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 23, 2014
The Seventh Sunday After The Epiphany—Based on Matthew 5:38-48*

Turn the other cheek.

Give not only your coat but the shirt off your back.

Carry your oppressor's burden not just one mile, but two.

Love your enemies.

These are some of the hardest verses in the Bible. I have to tell you I was sorely tempted to preach on I Corinthians. But when something is this hard, I think we need to pay attention to it.

How do we hear these verses? How do we hear them today, in light of the public violence we're seeing in Ukraine, in Venezuela, in Syria and Lebanon (to name only a few places)? How do we hear them when we may know of violence that remains private, hidden?

Do we need to take these instructions of Jesus seriously, or can we just gloss over them as something not relevant to us? Can we dismiss them as words that still sound as ridiculous as they did 2000 years ago?

Scholars believe these verses represent authentic sayings of Jesus. These are exactly the kind of turning-the-world-upside-down things Jesus said and did. I think we need to take them seriously.

"An eye for an eye," Gandhi famously said, "only ends up making the whole world blind." Strange as this may sound, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" actually represented a leap forward in humankind's effort at fairness. In prehistoric times, there was no such law. If someone blinded you or killed a member of your family, you might take revenge in any way you could; you might massacre their entire family or wipe out their village, if you dared. If they were of higher rank or more powerful than you, then you might have no recourse at all.

By about 2000 years before Jesus, this law of retaliation (called *lex talionis* in Latin), "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a foot for a foot," represented an early attempt to limit revenge and to ensure justice. Under *lex talionis*, revenge is limited to the extent of the injury; i.e., the punishment must fit the crime. In theory at least, it also gave an ordinary person recourse against a wealthier or more powerful person.

Over time, this law in Israel was modified to allow a financial payment in place of inflicting injury. If you blind me, you might be able to pay me a certain amount of money rather than losing your own eye.

But after 2000 years of *lex talionis*, Jesus urges his listeners—who live under oppressive Roman rule—not only to forego revenge but also to respond in a completely different way. He gives four examples. Remember that Jesus likes to make his points using hyperbole, even humor.

First example: "Turn the other cheek." In Jesus' time, being slapped on the right cheek was particularly demeaning. You've either been hit with the left hand (considered unclean), or the back of the right hand, an especially serious insult.

If we are slapped, or hit, or attacked—physically, verbally, even electronically—it is instinctive to want to strike back. Once, early in my days in New York, some teenage boys, larger than I, grabbed me as I was leaving the subway car. I—I, an adult, a peaceable person, a card-carrying Episcopalian—instinctively swung at them,

backhanded as a matter of fact. Their eyes widened in shock, as did my own. The car doors closed as we stared at each other through opposite sides of the glass. I was glad that train pulled away from the station, because I don't like to think where we would have gone from there.

Jesus is asking his followers—asking us—to go against our natural instinct to strike back, to choose a different way of acting, a different way of relating to each other.

Turning the other cheek does not mean being a doormat. It does not mean putting up with abuse. It does not mean passively accepting injustice. It's not an invitation to let the Hitlers of the world run rampant.

"If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak also." I wonder if Jesus' audience went from shaking their heads to laughing at this point. In a time when people wore only two garments, one outer and one inner, following this instruction would mean a lot of naked people running around. Jesus' point? Defuse conflict by giving more than is needed.

"If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." A Roman soldier or other official could require—commandeer—a person to carry something for one mile, no more. I haven't found any rules about weight limits, so might be 20 pounds, 40 pounds, even more. Remember Simon of Cyrene was made to carry Jesus' cross. That's what happened there. Jesus' point? Don't let resentment and bitterness eat you up. Take the initiative by choosing your own response.

These examples of how to respond to those who injure us are summed up in what is to me Jesus' most startling and hardest teaching: "Love your enemies." The Hebrew scriptures required Israelites to love their neighbors, to avoid vengeance and holding grudges, even to act kindly and fairly to foreigners living in their midst. The Hebrew scriptures had no commandment about hating one's enemies. Hating one's enemies—those who harm us or want to harm us—seems to come naturally now, as then.

But *love* one's enemies? Love the one who does you harm? Love the one who's out to get you? That does not come naturally. It's one of the hardest things I know

Benjamin Franklin said, "Love your enemies, for they tell you your faults." The author Eleanor Doan said, "Love your enemies—it will drive them nuts."

I am reminded of the psychiatrist Scott Peck's definition of love in his first book, *The Road Less Traveled*: "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth ... Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love."

As I wrestled with these hard verses this week, I remembered the shooting at the Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, PA, a little over seven years ago. Maybe you remember it, too. A man walked into the schoolhouse, released all the boys, and then shot the girls, killing five and injuring a number of others. You may remember, as I did, that Amish community's response: The Amish responded by offering immediate forgiveness to the killer—even attending his funeral—and embracing his family.

By that first afternoon, the shooter's father, a retired police officer, had wiped away so many tears that he'd rubbed his skin raw. He hung his head, inconsolable. "I will never face my Amish friends again," he said, over and over.

An Amish neighbor named Henry came to find him at his kitchen table and told him otherwise. "We love you. We don't hold anything against you or your son," Henry said as he massaged his neighbor's slumped shoulders. "We're a forgiving people."

Seven years later, Christ King, the father of one of the girls killed in that shooting, acknowledged how hard forgiveness is, saying the Amish are like anyone else, with the same frailties and emotions. Mr. King said, "We hope that we have forgiven, but there actually are times that we struggle with that, and I have to ask myself, 'Have I really forgiven?' He continued, "We have a lot of work to do to live up to what we are bragged up to be. Everyone was talking about this forgiveness thing, and I felt that was putting a lot of weight on our shoulders to live up to that." [<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/amish-school-shooters-kin-horror-then-healing>]

Jesus is teaching us a new way of living, a new way of relating to each other. Jesus teaches us, not only with these words, but also through his whole life and death and resurrection. This new way of living and relating to each other is hard, and it doesn't come naturally. I'm not sure it ever gets easier. Jesus is challenging us, calling us to be better than we are, to "be perfect as [our] heavenly Father is perfect."

Now, as a recovering perfectionist, I need to say something about that. The Greek word translated for us as "perfect" carries the meaning of mature or complete, rather than that of making no mistakes. Jesus is challenging us to grow, to keep growing more and more into the way God would have us live with each other.

The pastor, author, writer and poet Eugene Peterson, interprets these last verses this way: Jesus said:

I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves ... In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up ... Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

[*The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language*, p. 20]

By the grace of God, what seems impossible becomes possible.

May the grace of God and the peace of Christ, which we share every time we gather here, heal our relationships. May that grace and peace help us grow into the wholeness God intends for each of us.

Amen.

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