

Our Gospel passage this evening is one of the hardest to read or hear. Which of us has a first impulse to “turn the other cheek” or “to love your enemies”? This is another case when our impulse is more likely to be that of St. Augustine, “Make me good, but not yet!”

So before we dive into our particular reading, let us set it in context. Our reading comes around the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon begins right after our reading last week in which Jesus chose the first disciples and ministers to crowds of people both Jew and Gentile from all over Judea, Galilee, the Decapolis, and from beyond the Jordan. The Sermon starts with the Beatitudes, the Blessed are....listing. The Sermon continues with addressing multiple ethical issues. Throughout Jesus insists upon a higher standard for His followers. The issues include anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, then our two from this evening, retaliation and love for enemies. The sermon continues with almsgiving, prayer, fasting, treasure, etc.

The entire sermon, which only appears in Matthew, although the ethical injunctions are dispersed throughout the other gospels, demands more of a follower of Jesus than was the custom of the day. For example with adultery, the law said that one should have sexual relations only with one’s spouse. Jesus says that it is a sin to even have lustful thoughts about another woman. Note that in that sexist time so long ago this was not meant as an exclusive punishment for straight men and lesbian woman; it wasn’t a free pass for gay men or straight women.

Our passage tonight begins with retaliation. Some historical information is useful. The Law of Moses as expressed in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy was consistent on the subject of retaliation. It was concerned that punishment should be commensurate with the crime committed; hence as it is expressed in Exodus 21 verses 23 – 25: *If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.* But Jesus says, according to the New Revised Standard Version of the bible which we use: *Do not resist an evildoer.* But a number of scholars dispute that translation. It is not that we should not resist an evildoer it is that we should not use violence to oppose an evil doer. For example, David Bentley Hart in a literal translation of The New Testament in which he attempted to avoid thinking of doctrine but only what the text says translated the sentence as follows: *Whereas I tell you not to resist the wicked man by force.* In other words Jesus is reinforcing peacemaking, a violent response will only elicit more violence. The example that follows *But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.* Also has to be understood in context. In biblical times and long after, striking someone on the cheek was the greatest of insults, you may remember that the classic way to challenge someone to a duel to defend one’s honour was to strike his cheek in order to challenge your assailant to give you satisfaction by armed conflict. Jesus is saying by turning the other cheek you are disarming your assailant by showing that his initial blow means nothing to you, and it is he that is shamed. Meeting violence with non-violence is the only solution. God knows we have

centuries of evidence that without exception, either immediately or in time, violence only begets violence.

Let us turn to Love Your Enemies. I don't think in all my 72 years have there been more names on the list of those whom I find it difficult to love. With the appalling rise in racism, authoritarianism, and self-serving despots and the equally appalling diminishment of compassion, egalitarianism, and democratic champions, I don't think I have ever been so tempted to pessimism and withdrawal – what the hell, I won't be around much longer anyway! For at least 65 years I have thought global war unthinkable – now I am not so sure. I recently noted in a Sunday homily that the Bureau of Atomic Scientists have set their Doomsday Clock to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it ever has been since it was devised in 1947.

Well Jesus has told us that meeting violence with violence is only guaranteed to destroy. I know for sure that if I hate Donald Trump or Binyamin Netanyahu or Vladimir Putin or even someone right here on Salt Spring who makes me angry, I only poison myself and strengthen them in any number of unfortunate ways. Look what has happened to re-energize the extreme right wing, as if they needed it, since the assassination of Charlie Kirk. The assassin tragically thought his violent act would reduce violent acts; instead, the temperature and the tone of violent rhetoric has never been higher or more virulent and we can easily predict that violent acts will continue to follow. Imagine if his misguided and tragic courage in performing that act of violence had been applied to acts of peace and love.

Our challenge is to truly believe that Charlie Kirk, Donald Trump, Binyamin Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin, and so many others are children of God just as we are. We must be resolute in prayer for their redemption as much as we pray for our own. Above all we must renounce hate. Hate is never a solution; its major accomplishment is self-destruction. Confucius said, "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." So it is with hate.

We understand how important it is to have compassion for the sick, the suffering, the bereaved, but can we see how horrible it is to have a desperate need to cling to power, how crushing it is to lose any connection to truth, how isolating it is to be pathologically overcome by narcissism. Can we understand the fear behind the compulsive need to assert power? Are those people not as needy of compassion as any we have on the prayer list? Easily said, not so easy to feel it. That is why we need to pray. God does not ask us to like them, we are simply asked to desire their redemption at least as much as we desire our own. We pray for victims all the time. If we perceived the victimizers victimizing as victims of their own pathologies, their lot might be better as would the fate of those whom they victimize.

I ask you to sit in silence for a moment and think of these things. (*Pause*) That was 89 seconds. It is not a long time. The need for prayer and compassion for all is immediate. Amen