

“A Counter-Intuitive Embrace of Love”

Matthew 5:38-48

February 23, 2014

This sermon was preached by Pastors Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

Dear Sisters and Brothers, grace and peace be with you all.

This morning we finish a four week exploration of a section of Scripture called the “Sermon on the Mount.” In it Jesus has been teaching large crowds of people about the kingdom of heaven – and the heart of God. He has said things like people who are peacemakers are the children of God. He raises up as blessed people those who are needy and often over-looked by others. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is seen in people who do good works for others as a way to give honor to God. It’s quite a list.

In this week’s section Jesus calls those who want to be part of the kingdom of heaven not to take up arms, but to be bearers of the kingdom by turning the other cheek, loving their enemies and praying for those who persecute you. It all seems so ridiculous compared to the world we know. What kind of kingdom works this way? What kind of interest do we, as people gathered in Christian community on this day have for this kind of talk?

These words of Jesus – challenging, confusing, and vexing – aren’t just the heart of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, but the very heart of what it means to be Christian. It is the inverse logic of the kingdom of God, or what a friend of mine likes to refer to as “crazy talk.”

What he means, I think, is simply this: Where else do you find the invitation to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and more? Pretty much nowhere. Why? Because it makes no sense. Crazy talk.

Jesus proclaims a kingdom that is in almost every way different from the kingdom of the world. We live in a world that tells us we should look out for number one; that you love those who love you and hate those who hate you, that you get what you work for and what is yours is yours.

So after setting out his crazy vision for the Christian life -- at least according to our experience in the world –Jesus does two things. First, he assails the logic of the kingdom of the world. The principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” seems to be just. The punishment should fit the crime, right? Jesus, however, tells his followers not to resist one who is evil. In fact, when wronged, Jesus said, it is better to suffer more wrong than to retaliate unjustly. But Jesus doesn’t expect his followers to suffer passively, though. They are called to do the unthinkable. They are called to love those who persecute them and pray for them. In this kingdom of heaven, love is not for the faint of heart.

In the past two weeks the world’s attention has been directed toward Russia and the winter Olympics – but not just for the extraordinary athletic prowess of young adults. American media and representatives of our government have raised our eye toward bombings and terrorist attacks that they said would occur. We were told it was not a matter of if – but when and how close to Sochi such attacks would take place.

We have become a people tuned to expect the horrible and horrendous. Three years ago, when the President announced that US special forces had captured and killed Osama bin Laden we were led back through 10 years of trauma. Crowds of people gathered in front of the White House and at Ground Zero exuberantly chanting "USA!" and singing the national anthem. Others retorted that they would not celebrate any person's death, no matter who it was. Still others retrieved unsettling data about what it has cost us to find and kill bin Laden, in terms of dollars and human lives.

Finally, from those with an intimate connection to the innocents of 9/11, there were tweets about tears. Tears of relief and tears because the news dragged them back to the still-tender memories of a decade earlier.

All of these responses are authentic for a Christian who lives in America. Bin Laden has had more influence in the last decade over the way we live our lives than any other person. He was a wedge in our politics, he disrupted our ability to come and go freely; he triggered a vast global security and surveillance apparatus. He was directly or indirectly the focus of two wars that affected the material well-being and peace of mind of millions here and across the world.

Bin Laden desecrated Islam and at the same time radicalized Christianity, making some Christians more enthusiastic about military action than they might have been otherwise, while making others more enthusiastic about trying to find peaceful solutions to global problems.

A lasting impact of 9/11 and other violence events since is fear. Today, we live with a higher awareness of fear, not only on a global scale, but right here and in our everyday lives. We know more about enemy threats and like the predictions of terrorism in Sochi, we are constantly reminded of the threat of enemies and the fear of unpredictable, catastrophic violence.

So, in that light, as Christians we live in a bind, don't we? We live as Americans with respectful honoring of civic responsibility and honorable conduct. And as Christians we strive to answer Jesus' call to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. This is not easy. Some of us feel a strong civic sense that what our government does to eliminate terrorist threats as it did three years ago, was the embodiment of public justice.

But our political identity and our identity as followers of Jesus are rarely reconcilable. Jesus did not meet enemies with violence. He asserted that the way to loose ourselves of our enemies was, counter-intuitively, by loving them and forgiving them - by wanting God's best for them and believing in the Holy Spirit's power to convert any person to faithful obedience. Jesus implied that if the Spirit does not convert them to goodness in this life, any judgment of their deeds is to be left in the hands of their creator - God alone. Our job is to never cease praying that those we see as our enemies receive God's blessing, too.

I have wondered over the years what God tried to do to win bin Laden back to love. I wonder about the confounding ability of human beings to resist the love of God.

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" Jesus said. I am interested in what that kind of love looks like in our 21st century world, in our daily lives, and in our public lives amidst all the fear and threats of violence that occur every day. Those first Christians were known for their

love. How might we be known for love in our time, in our neighborhoods, in our schools and communities?

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” Jesus said – and do you see the wisdom here? Loving them lessens our self-interest. Loving only people who love us and doing good to only those who do good to us won’t move us beyond the violence-saturated and fear-driven history of the world. We have to find a new way forward out of our own self-interest.

“Out of Africa” is a memoir by Isak Dinesen, first published in 1937. It recounts events of the seventeen years when she made her home in Kenya, then called British East Africa. The book is a meditation about her life on a coffee plantation. The book is also a tribute to some of the people who touched her life there.

One of the people who touched Dinesen’s life was a young Kikuyu boy who appeared at her door one day to ask for a job as a house servant. She hires him, and three months later, he asks her for a letter of recommendation to give to a Muslim Sheik (Ali bin Slim), who lives in a nearby town. The boy is hoping to go and work as a house servant for this man.

Not wanting to lose the services of the boy, Dinesen offers to raise his pay, but he wasn't interested in more money. He told her that he wanted to be either a Christian or a Muslim, and that is why he had come to her home, to observe how a Christian lived. Now, in working for the sheik he would observe how a Muslim lived, and then he would make his choice.

Dinesen writes that she wished the boy had told her that when he first arrived.

Jesus’ teachings before us today, as confounding as they seem, are actually very clear: Our actions must be guided by the deepest principles of Christian faith. Love must be the regulating ideal.

Jesus proclaims a kingdom that is in almost every way different from this world. He offers the only motivation strong enough to withstand all the forces inside us and around us, to look out first and foremost for our own interests. In doing so, Jesus call us to love our enemies – which brings us into the very nature of God – the one who is merciful and loving even to those who don’t deserve it. And that includes us.

And because that’s so hard for us to believe, Jesus ultimately won’t just talk about that love, he’ll show it, spreading his arms wide upon the cross to offer God’s loving embrace to each and all of us.

Dear God, immerse us in your mercy that we might be merciful, submerge us in your love that we might be loving, bathe us in your compassion that we might be compassionate. For mercy, love, and compassion for all is the only way forward in this world that you love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.