

“Intimidated?” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
February 19, 2017 Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 5:38-48

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Are you feeling a bit intimidated right now? Maybe, maybe not. But most folks find it difficult to relate to turning the other cheek when insulted, or worse, physically struck. Then there’s that love your enemy statement from Jesus that I just read. There are people you may just consider unlovable. Oh, and the icing on the cake, these verses end with **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** Some of you may be thinking that you can’t possibly be as perfect as God – so why try?

What are we to think about these verses and how they apply to our lives?

Too often the interpretation of these verses have down-played the literal meaning of Jesus’ words. For example, some Bible scholars have said these verses applied to Jesus’ time, but not to our time. Jesus’ time was so much simpler than the world we live in now, his words here don’t apply today. Another example, Jesus’ directives are simply behavioral expectations. They are something to aspire to and since we can’t meet them, that failure makes God’s grace all the sweeter. But none of these interpretations that explain away Jesus’ words really hold water if we are to believe the Bible - in Matthew’s biography of Jesus especially. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus means what he says.

So how are we to think about these verses today, in our culture, in 2017?

When you think about turning the other cheek, do you think coward or wimp? If you do, you’re not alone. That’s society’s idea of someone who doesn’t ‘stand up’ for herself or himself. But is that really the way we should think, given these verses?

Let’s say someone hits you on the cheek or insults you. Just consider that by not reacting with an equal reaction, an eye for an eye, that you are sending a strong message to that person. That message - you’re not going to play that person’s game. You’re not going to meet force with force. By doing so you disrupt the expected. That changes your interaction with the person.

By refusing to participate in the aggressor’s paradigm of hate and brutality, you are actually resisting that person’s underlying values and refusing to participate in them. If you do participate, you are perpetuating the adversarial relationship. Do not fight fire with fire, but fire with water. Refuse to take part in a relationship based on injury and domination.

But what are you really doing when you reject such violence and injury and domination? You are loving as God loves. You are revealing God’s way, God’s love to the world. God loves those who are unlovable. The scripture says God **makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.** (verse 45) By not meeting fire with fire, your behavior models God’s love. Jesus’ words call each of us to love as God loves.

The example we have of God's love is Jesus Christ, who took the abuse of the powerful, suffered, asked God to forgive those who did violence against him and then rose from the dead to provide forgiveness for each of us.

OK, reality check. Do you feel you can't live up to these standards that Jesus presents in these verses? If so, you're not alone. But this reading is not a word of judgement because you and I cannot meet the requirements. What Jesus is telling us today in these words is a plan for us on how to live as Christ-followers.

Can it work. It has and is. Think about the black church in Charleston. Dylann Roof killed nine church members during a Bible study. The victim's family members publicly forgave him. One member of the church said, "hate won't win." Think of Charles Roberts who killed 10 Amish school girls and was forgiven by the parents of the victims. The members of the Amish community even visited Roberts family to comfort them. These are just two examples of Christ-followers being God's love to the world, forgiving – turning the other cheek.

Can turning the other cheek help things to change? I believe it can. Look at South Africa. In John Carlin's book, "Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation." Carlin explains how Mandela treated his jailers with dignity, worked side by side with those who'd orchestrated his long imprisonment, learned to speak the language of the people who had created apartheid, encouraged those who had worked for de Klerk to stay and work for him. His ability to look beyond his own emotions and well-being time and time again was remarkable. (Presbyterian Outlook, 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time – February 19, 2017 by Jill Duffield)

Toward the conclusion of the book Carlin writes, "He succeeded because he chose to see good in people who ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have judged to be beyond redemption. ... Instead of eliminating the enemy and starting from zero, the enemy was incorporated into a new order deliberately built on the foundations of the old. Conceiving of his revolution not primarily as the destruction of apartheid but, more enduringly, as the unification and reconciliation of all South Africans, Mandela broke the historical mold."

Mandela shared God's love with his enemies and, in the process, changed the culture of a country. We have our own example here in the USA with Dr. Martin Luther King.

We are surrounded by examples of people who live unselfishly, who love unconditionally, who care for all. These examples provide us with proof that we can follow, with God's help, the words of Jesus on loving the unlovable, of caring for those who are less fortunate.

You may still feel a bit intimidated by these verses I read today. But I urge you to examine your life and see how you can change things so you can love as God loves. What changes do you need to make in your life? What attitudes do you need to change so people can see Christ in you?

You can't do it alone. It is only with God's help that you can change. Ask God for that help. And may God bless your every effort!