

“The Potential Beloved”

Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-48

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We have to be honest: there are bad people out there. We cannot hide our heads in the sand and pretend that everyone is truly good deep down inside, and with the right combination of therapy and talking about our feelings and coddling, we can draw out that goodness in everyone. We can't pretend that if we all just sit in a circle and hold hands and sing campfire songs together, we can all be friends. There are people out there who want to kill us simply because we are Americans. There are people who would insist that we must accept their religion or their way of life or their beliefs, or we must die. There are people who would happily take things from us, who would throw us out of our homes or leave us with unpayable medical bills or shut down our livelihoods, all in the name of making a little more profit for themselves, and they would sleep well at night. There isn't always enough to go around for everyone, and so there are people who will gladly hoard more than they need and ignore the plight of their neighbors in need, and they will find all kinds of ways to rationalize their actions. We've got to be honest about the evil in the world.

But at the same time, we can't ignore the very real dangers that come from labeling a whole class or nation or color of people as being “bad people.” We have to be honest about the ugly parts of our history that have had roots in classifying a broad swath of people as being “the enemy” or “the other.” We can't pretend we haven't willfully ignored the complexities of people's complaints about us because it's much easier to simplify the situation down to a sound bite. We can't hide our heads in the sand about the ways we have benefited from the oppression of others, and the millions of innocents who have been harmed by our attempts to get the bad guys, and the ways we have dehumanized entire nations of people by calling them names and reducing them to stereotypes based on the worst people among them. We've got to be honest about the evil in the world, but we've also got to be honest about the evil in each of our own hearts and the potential within each of us to do great evil to others.

In other words, we read the Sermon on the Mount and we get to the part we've read today, and we stumble because of the reality of evil. Jesus can't possibly mean for us to take all of this seriously, because he's just not being realistic. It's a nice ideal to love your enemies, but the practical reality is that sometimes you have to kill them, we say. It's a nice ideal to never be angry with someone else or to never look lustfully at someone else or to be willing to go an extra mile with someone who's oppressing you, but it's just not being very honest about the limitations of the human heart and the fact that there are some genuinely bad people out there who need to pay for their deeds.

Remember a couple weeks ago when we started into the Sermon on the Mount, we began by saying that this is the point when Jesus has been announced and revealed as the King, and now He's laying out how His kingdom is going to work. So we launched into the Beatitudes, this distillation of Jesus' ethic in which He declares that it is those who rely on God who are blessed by God's presence: it's not the strong and the brash and the self-reliant, it's the meek, the peacemakers, the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those are the people God can work through, He's saying; God's kingdom is present among those kinds of people. And then, last week, we listened as Jesus invited us to be salt and light, to challenge the rot and darkness of our world by living in His kingdom for other

people, and making a difference. But He also said that He didn't come to abolish the Law, meaning that while we live for others, we are still rooted in what God has said: we aren't defined by what other people say, we're defined by what God says. We go on the offense against the world's decay and darkness in the name of God's love. And it's today that we dive deep into what that love looks like.

Jesus works His way through a variety of examples of what love looks like, and He does so in a curious way: He keeps saying something to the effect of, "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." "You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder,' ...but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." And so on. He does this with the law against murder, and the law against adultery, and the law against breaking oaths made to the Lord, and the law against seeking retribution beyond what was done to you – you can't take two eyes in revenge against someone taking one of your eyes – and then He gets to the law about loving your neighbor. And in each case, Jesus ups the ante. He eliminates the option of reducing God's law merely to something we can manage and control on our own; you can't check the box just because you haven't murdered someone, you also have to *be* a person in control of your anger and your words. He does this immediately after He has assured us that He did not come to abolish the law of God, and yet He keeps reinterpreting and adding to the law of God.

He is reinterpreting God's words based purely on His own authority: "You have heard it said to you, but I say to you." He's not basing His words on the opinions of some other famous teacher or prophet or even Moses, He's taking the word of God and adding His own words because He is the living God incarnate. You might remember a couple weeks ago when we started talking about the Sermon on the Mount, we said that people will often try to get out of taking Jesus' words seriously because they say it's all metaphorical or it's all an ideal that we can't actually live out. But underlying those assumptions are the question of whether God is dead or absent. If God is no longer speaking to us because He can't or won't, then all we're left with is what He's said in the past, and that can't change, and our relationship to the law is to preserve it and keep it safe. But here in this sermon, we see God speaking again: God is alive and present and active, and so the question is not whether we're able to follow His words, but whether we're willing to obey. The words of God are a way of knowing Him, not just of knowing what He said in the past.

And if that's true, then when Jesus says "but I say to you" that the love God is calling us to is so focused on the other person that it is personally costly and intentionally difficult, He means for us to take Him seriously. He intends for us to believe Him when our love for others not only restrains us from doing them harm, but it also makes us stop and think about the private thoughts we think about them. That love is so precious that it is worth interrupting the worship of God to preserve a relationship. We value others so highly that we cannot bear to think of them as merely a piece of meat or an object of lust. And in a culture in which it was too easy for a man to divorce his wife and leave her destitute, Jesus says that the covenant of marriage is too important to throw away lightly, and both members of the marriage must be valued and protected. And in our words to others, rather than relying on empty oaths and promises, we take our integrity toward them so seriously that no oath is necessary; we'll value that person enough to do what we say.

Jesus leaves us in an uncomfortable place: sure, you may not have murdered anyone, but were you angry with them? Anger is not always a sin, but it can be. Sure, you may not have

committed a racist act, but what's going on in your heart? Sure, you may not have physically attacked an immigrant or a foreigner, but have you justified those who do, or joined in the fear that motivates them? You may not have committed adultery, but have you winked at the dehumanization and the sexualizing of others? Jesus is definitively, resoundingly telling us that the ends never justify the means or anything else leading up to them.

And then we get to the capstone, the most difficult part. Not only do you not seek retribution from an evil person who does you harm, Jesus says, you don't even resist them; you give to the one who asks you and you go two miles with someone who forces you to go one. You don't only love your neighbor and stop there, you also love your enemy. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And we've got a hard time with that. But really, this is what Jesus has been building up to so far in the Sermon on the Mount. The ethic of the Beatitudes leads us here. Being salt and light lead us here. Fulfilling the law God gave in ages past leads us here. He has just shown us what the fulfillment of God's law looks like: it looks like a love for other people that is put into action by such things as being aware of your anger and your lust and your integrity in your words. Loving your enemies is just taking it to its logical conclusion.

As I was preparing for this sermon I read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon "On Loving Your Enemies," which he wrote in 1963 while in jail for his work to gain equal rights for African-Americans. I was tempted to just read you his sermon for today, because there's no way I was going to say it better than he did. But let's think about his situation: he's a Christian minister sitting in jail for his work against unjust oppression, writing and preaching to Christians who are facing German Shepherds and fire hoses from their own government because they want to be treated like human beings, and Dr. King's message to them is to take seriously Jesus' message about loving your enemies.

What does actually loving our enemies look like? Dr. King said this: "First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive...It is impossible even to begin the act of loving one's enemies without the prior acceptance of the necessity, over and over again, of forgiving those who inflict evil and injury upon us." In other words, loving our enemies takes seriously the fact that they will do evil, and we must decide ahead of time to forgive them anyway. He also said that "second, we must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is...we love our enemies by realizing that they are not totally bad and that they are not beyond the reach of God's redemptive love." He said that "third, we must not seek to defeat or humiliate the enemy but to win his friendship and understanding." Love in this case is a decision to action, not a feeling. Dr. King said, "We should be happy that [Jesus] did not say, 'Like your enemies.' It is almost impossible to like some people... But Jesus recognized that love is greater than like."

As I read through his sermon, it struck me that Dr. King was not writing *to* people like me, he could very legitimately have been writing *about* people like me. I've never had an enemy like that in my life. I've never faced down attack dogs or spent time in jail. We tend to think of racism and segregation being associated with the South, but the KKK was extremely active in Indiana, where I grew up. As I've told you before, the town I grew up in used to be a "sundown town," meaning if you weren't white, you'd better be out of town by the time the sun went down. The town where I went to college was the site of the last confirmed lynching in the North, in 1930. So while I've never done anything overtly racist in my life, Dr. King could legitimately look at me, or someone like me, and associate me with the enemy. And so as I was reading his sermon, I realized that he wasn't telling me

how to love my enemy, he was telling himself how to love *me*. I'm not the one who has been wronged and needs to learn how to love, I might be the one who needs to *be* loved.

Maybe that puts things in a different light. Not how do I love my enemies, but how would I want those who see me as their enemy to look at me? What would I want them to know about me, about my motives, about my mistakes and failures? Those things don't excuse the evils I might commit, but maybe they make me more understandable as a person. Maybe they make me just another person in need of grace, maybe even an awful lot of grace, but maybe I'm not beyond the redeeming power of God. Maybe I'd want those who see me as their enemy to see that I'm not beyond repentance and redemption, and that they and I together can have hope of being brothers and sisters together under Christ. And maybe the same is true of *my* enemies. We tell Jesus it's not practical for us to love our enemies...is it practical for our enemies to love us?

Dr. King said, "Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else?" He said that "hate scars the soul and distorts the personality...hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true." Drawing from a story of how Abraham Lincoln was one day confronted by a northerner who objected to President Lincoln's stated desire not to destroy the southerners who were seen as "enemies" during the Civil War. Dr. King quoted Lincoln to say, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" Many of the laws in the Torah that God gave His people, for example the law about only taking one eye in retribution for losing one eye, were intended to limit vengeance and honor-killing. The goal was to prevent generation after generation of feuding that could wipe out entire families and clans. That's what hate does. That's what failing to love our enemies does. There's really no other choice but to love. Jesus tells us that if we want to be "children of our Father in heaven," we need to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Love is an opportunity, a privilege, a chance to break out of the cycle and not be bound by hate or lust or anger or vengeance, but instead to be a part of the working of God's kingdom and shout to the heavens that God's power is greater than the violence of the world. Jesus seems wholly unconcerned with the question of who's right and who's wrong. Perfection is found in costly love.



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