

Sermon for February 19, 2017 (Epiphany 7, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Corinthians 3:10-23; Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 5:38-48

Title: What More Are You Doing Than Others?

“If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

What more are you doing than others?

Once again, my friends, we are confronted by the clear expectation of the Lord that you and I are to DO more – and to BE more – than others.

But how do we do this? How do we put these teachings into practice?
How do we actually learn to love our enemies?

Well, to begin, please ask yourself this question: who is my enemy?

Who is my enemy? Do you have a picture of someone in your mind?

Consider that mental image for a moment.

And then ask yourself this: how might I show love toward this person?

How might I be with them and act for their well-being in the same way that I act for my own well-being?

In case you have forgotten, in case the relentless messages of pop culture have you confused, then let me remind you that the love we are talking about has nothing to do with feelings. To love as God loves is a commitment of the will to be WITH another as one who stands FOR them, FOR all that they need to be complete and whole as God intended.

To love another is a choice, and this is a choice that Jesus expects his people to make in every scenario of life – even when confronted by those who seek to do us harm.

But I am certain that some of you are wondering: are we supposed to take these words of Jesus seriously? Are we actually supposed to go the extra mile with people we detest?

The answer is yes. And countless numbers of Christians over the centuries have diligently labored to take these words of Jesus to heart and to make them real.

You might recall a story from the Egyptian desert communities of the fourth century when a band of thieves descended on one particular community.

They stormed into the room of one man and declared: "We have come to take away everything that you have!"

To which that wise old elder replied: "My sons, take all you want."

So they took everything they could find. But as soon as they left, the elder noticed a bag in one dark corner which they had missed.

So he quickly picked it up and ran after them. When he caught the thieves, he yelled to them: "My sons, you forgot this! Take this also."

At the sight of this, those thieves were amazed and knew that they were dealing with someone beyond ordinary, someone close to God. So they brought everything back to his room and asked for his forgiveness, which the elder gladly bestowed.

(The Wisdom of the Desert by Thomas Merton, p.59).

This is but one brief story of so many disciples who have actually put these words of the Lord into practice. Remember: Jesus himself forgave his killers on the cross (Luke 23:34). The first martyr Stephen did the same thing (Acts 7:60).

The early bishop Polycarp urged the church to pray for their enemies while on the way to his own death. Patrick the apostle of Ireland went back to give his life for the well-being of those who had captured him and had killed his family.

Francis of Assisi sought out the enemy of his people, the Sultan of Egypt, in order to talk with him about his experience of God.

In more recent times, in 1996, the monks of Tibhirine chose to stay in Algeria and to minister among the people even though their lives were threatened by radical Islamic terrorists. Seven of the nine brothers were beheaded.

YES, the Lord meant these words of his to be put into practice.

And YES, it can be a dangerous path to walk.

But NO, it does not mean that we must relinquish every form of defense.

Many of you know that I have applied for a commission as a Navy Reserve Chaplain. As is typical with such a large bureaucracy, the process of approval is painfully slow, and it has not yet been determined. However, I have been assured that it is only a matter of time. And if this approval does come down the chain of command, I hope

to take the oath of office and be commissioned as a Naval Officer here on Sunday afternoon, April 9.

As a nation “of the people, by the people, and for the people”, I believe that we all have a duty toward the defense of the nation, and toward the cause of peace. This is not something that we can assign entirely to the responsibility of others acting on our behalf. We must be engaged, and if in this capacity as Navy Reserve Chaplain I can help in some small way in that effort, then it will be my honor and privilege to do so.

But how, you may ask, does that service fit with the call of Jesus to love our enemies? And what does it actually mean when Jesus calls us not to resist an evildoer? How does that square with service in the military?

This question has been debated continuously ever since this Gospel was written! I cannot give you a definitive interpretation here today, but from where I stand, this is how I make sense of our Lord’s teaching in this passage.

As a disciple of Jesus who knows himself to be adopted by grace into the family of God, into the Body of Christ, I know with confidence that I am safe. Entirely and completely. As Paul explained in such euphoric language, “all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God!” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

That’s incredible! And, if true, then no one on earth can ever do me any harm. I am safe, I am complete, I am whole, because Christ has made me so.

On that solid foundation of confidence and trust, I can turn the other cheek when someone attacks me. I have no need to defend myself, therefore I can CHOOSE to make myself vulnerable. I can CHOOSE to give to someone who wants to sue me. I can CHOOSE to give to those trying to steal from me.

When done as a choice on the basis of faith and trust in God’s unfailing care, then this is one of the most powerful and subversive and revolutionary acts that any human being can perform.

After all, this is what Jesus did. He did not defend himself, but gave himself up freely even to death so that we might be reconciled to God.
It was a choice that changed the course of human history.

Walking in his Way, by the grace of God I will never act to defend myself – not against a physical attack nor an attack against my reputation.
All such defense stems from fear.

However, I will always act to defend those committed to my care. If necessary, if it was required, I could kill someone who seeks to attack you, my parish family, or my blood family, or my nation.

Such defense is not about self. It is not about my ego and what I want or what I need. It is about protecting others, being responsible for others, and in that scenario I would most certainly resist an evildoer by any means necessary.

In this way, I know that our government must protect our citizens against nefarious agents. We must have a strong military, and the best weaponry possible, simply because there are others in the world with malicious intent who would use those same weapons against us.

This is the distinction I make in understanding and applying the teaching of the Lord. But making this distinction most certainly does NOT mean that we cannot ask our government to act with love toward our enemies even while defending our people.

How is that possible? Well, today's Gospel shows us the Lord's plan for making the kingdom of heaven a reality on earth.
It happens when we LOVE enemies into neighbors by simple actions of trust and friendship.

After all, this is what he himself did. He ate dinner with tax collectors and sinners. He healed the servant of a Roman military officer. He reached out to Samaritans. Over and over again, Jesus showed us the way by taking simple steps of care and love to turn enemies into neighbors.

And we should ask our nation to act in the same way. To work, as far as we are able, at loving enemies into neighbors. To sit with them, to eat with them, to listen to

them, to show them the respect and honor due to them as people for whom Christ died.

“If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

How are we to do this? First and foremost, we open ourselves to the love of God and allow God to love through us. And we make the choice to be with our enemies, to treat them with care and compassion in simple yet concrete ways.

And in this way, God works through us to turn enemies into neighbors and to bring peace, to bring shalom, to this troubled world.

This is our calling. This is who we are as the Body of Christ.
Will you allow God to do this work of love through your words, your hands, your life?

May it be so. Amen.