

Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 2017  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
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There are times  
when we wish  
that Jesus didn't really mean  
what he says.

And I suspect  
that today's gospel  
is one of them.

It all begins  
reasonably enough.

Jesus sneaking away from the crowds  
and heading up a nearby hill  
taking only his closest friends with him.  
And then  
sitting down with them  
and beginning  
to speak.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

And so he goes on,  
talking of blessedness and hope  
and even when he gets to the end of his blessings and began to talk about persecution,  
it still seems fairly benign.

And then he begins to tell them  
about being salt and light,  
and giving glory to God,  
and that's okay too.

Though when he starts talking about anger  
they begin to squirm,

and lust  
and divorce  
and swearing,  
and you can imagine the disciples  
looking at one another  
and beginning to mutter  
that perhaps it is time for lunch  
and doesn't Jesus need a break?

But he continues on.

“You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer...”

No, Jesus, no! This is not what we signed up for.  
Religion is supposed to be about right and wrong,  
good and bad.  
If you do the right thing you get rewarded.  
If you do the wrong thing you get punished.  
Evildoers  
belong  
on the negative side of the equation. Bad, wrong,  
getting punished.  
That's what we've always been taught.  
That's how  
we've always lived.

But Jesus keeps going.  
If someone strikes you on the cheek,  
turn  
so they can strike you on the other side  
as well.  
If someone sues you  
for your coat,  
give them your cloak as well.  
If somebody asks you to carry something for a mile  
carry it for a second mile.  
In other words, it seems that Jesus is saying,  
just let them abuse you.

And if there are beggars, give them money.

It doesn't matter if they are worthy or not.  
If someone asks you to borrow something,  
lend it to them,  
whether or not you think they're going to return it.  
Love your neighbor.  
Love your neighbor.

You see,  
that old saying, "love your neighbor, hate your enemy"  
that nice neat division of right and wrong,  
that doesn't apply.  
Love your enemy  
and pray for those  
who persecute you.

"What?" the disciples say.  
"That's unrealistic.  
It's crazy!  
He has no idea what he's talking about."

Of course, that's our response as well, not just his disciples.  
We want to be able to explain it all away,  
to make it a little easier,  
to say  
yeah, he didn't really know what he was talking about,  
and what he really meant was this over here.  
He didn't know what it meant to have real enemies, for example.

And then you remember that Jesus' first years  
were spent as a refugee from Herod,  
who was trying to kill him.  
And his cousin John had been harassed  
and finally arrested  
and beheaded  
by another Herod.  
And Jesus lived in a country that was under occupation,  
where the Romans were not just benign occupiers.  
They kept a tight rule on the people;  
they restricted their movements  
and their access to their holy sites.

Jesus knew what it was  
to have an enemy.

So if Jesus did know what he was saying  
why on earth did he say it?

The answer he gives  
is that this  
is who God is.

God  
provides rain and sun  
for every one, not just  
the good.  
God loves everyone.

Of course that also undermines  
that argument that we sometimes hear  
when there's a natural disaster.  
People say, well they must have been doing something wrong:  
God  
must have been punishing them.

No.  
God provides the rain and sun for everyone.  
God loves us all.

And this is the same God that we see  
in Christ on the cross.  
The same picture of God.  
Remember how Christ hung there  
and as he was dying, he said  
"Father forgive them, because they don't know  
what they are doing.  
Forgive the ones who have just tortured me  
and hung me up to die."

Forgive.  
Love your enemies.  
Pray for those who persecute you.

The God we worship,

the Christ we follow,  
is one who loves everyone, everyone -  
even the ones  
who hate him.  
examples -

And Jesus says,  
if you are followers of me,  
if you are followers of Christ  
you are to be like this God.  
You are to love your enemies.  
You are to pray for those who persecute you.  
Because we are to be like God.

“Be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect.”  
One of the things  
that we miss in translation  
is that the understanding of perfection,  
    here in the original Greek  
is about coming to fullness,  
to completeness,  
to wholeness.  
What we’re being called to do  
is to become like God,  
to become who we are truly created and called  
to be,  
made in his image.

And we don’t do this alone.  
Because at the heart of the gospel is the fact  
that God dwells in us  
We’re just being the vessel  
for the love  
of God.  
We’re called to love our enemies,  
to pray for them,  
because God  
loves them.  
And God allows us  
to join in that love.

We live in a culture where people tend to assume that the default religion is Christianity, and therefore the default attitudes and behaviors of our culture are Christian.

But Jesus is saying,

“No.

They’re not.

You are to be different.”

We are to be different;  
we’re to behave differently.

In a culture

where revenge and hate are often given justification,  
we’re called to turn aside from that

and to offer

love.

And prayer.

Even

for those

who hurt us.

And I think it’s particularly important at times like these,  
times of uncertainty.

The uncertainty doesn't date back just to the election -  
whichever side you’re on.

It goes back long before.

Perhaps it was when 9/11 when we found ourselves under attack  
in a new and different way.

But I suspect it wasn’t just that; I suspect  
that it goes back  
further.

We live in a culture where, since the time of the Enlightenment,  
we’ve assumed that everything  
is getting better in the world.

But it’s not, is it?

We’re not on this constant upward climb.

Certainly the researchers say that those who were born in the 1960s and later  
will be the first generation

in many years who will not live a better, wealthier life

than their parents.  
who don't expect  
to be employed all the time,  
who may not own their own homes.  
Things are, in that sense going down.

We live in times of uncertainty  
when hope sometimes feels remote.

And it's in that context, in this context,  
that we as Christians  
who behave differently  
can make a difference.  
We can offer God's love to the world  
God that doesn't judge  
as we judge,  
but offers forgiveness and healing.  
We offer the promise,  
that yes, things can  
be different.

As Jesus said,  
we  
are the salt of the earth.  
We  
are the light of the world.