

**The Harder Way**  
Sermon on the Mount  
Matthew 5:38-58

**Slide 1: Love your Enemies**

Sometimes, when we read the Bible, we are comforted. The words we have from Jesus today are not for that purpose. In what is probably the most difficult sermon Jesus would give us, this conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, we are told and essentially commanded to do the unimaginable: Refrain from anger, turn the other cheek, don't retaliate, love your enemy, pray for those who hate you, and if that isn't enough, the kicker is the final verse, when Jesus tells us to "be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect."

How are we supposed to carry this out? It seems too difficult, too hard for us. And, let me tell you, this is just an opportune time for the preacher in me to duck and run. It's not that I purposefully chose these readings for today because they happen to be talked about in the media right now. They are the appointed readings for the season of

Epiphany and they are words of Jesus Christ, words that we pay attention to since Christ is who we worship and follow.

So, yes, when I looked at these texts for this week, I rather cringed. What could I possibly say that would be helpful? Maybe I'll just run for cover and choose other readings that are easier. For, if you are like me, our first instinct is to go where I don't think we ought – to excuse ourselves by saying that Jesus certainly didn't mean what he said. Really, there must be another interpretation, right, maybe an historical or critical one? Please?

But, unfortunately, we then see that Jesus might just have meant what he said when he asked us to do these hard things, to live the harder, more difficult way. For, if we look at the best Biblical witness to testify to this, we only need to look at Jesus himself.

- When being arrested, Jesus could have sent an army of angels to war against those who opposed him, but he didn't.

- When Peter went for the violent way and cut off a slave's ear, Jesus told him to put away his sword.
- When Jesus was spit upon and whipped, when nailed to a cross, he asked that God might forgive them and then he didn't even deny a criminal hanging next to him eternal life.
- And, then when he was victorious and rose from the dead, Jesus didn't retaliate in violence against those who killed him, and in some instances, such as the story of the Apostle Paul's torture and killing of innocent Christians, Christ turned that event into a conversion and renewal for Paul, even though Paul most certainly deserved death for that torture and killing of Christians.

But, really...how can we live like this? Surely Jesus isn't literal? Or, is he being extreme to make a point? Are we really expected to be doormats? Are we to let people push us around and bully us? Do we really have to forgive our enemies? Sure, it's a great idea, but come on? I can't be perfect as God is! The harder way to live is

too hard for any of us, even if Jesus did it!

So, if Jesus intended for us to really live this way, to forgive, to never repay evil, and to always pray for those we hate, what do we do? How do we live this? Is it possible?

### **Slide 2: Telos**

Well, the answer, and it's not a perfect one, but this answer comes in translation...the translation of the last verse of our reading: "Be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect." The word perfect is stark, impossible, and hard for us, but I think there are some other words we can use that better translate here. The word "perfect" in this case, stems from a word called "telos", the Greek word for "goal", "end", or "purpose".

The sense of the word is not intended perfection so much, as if it were a moralistic kind of perfection, but rather of purpose, of working towards a goal or to an end result. Another translation could also be "Live out your purpose, your intent, your goal, your identity as God does". In other words, fake it till you make it. Do the practice until it becomes

who you are. Of course, this is more difficult to express in a sentence, so the closest we can get in the English to the Greek is “perfect”. It doesn’t quite get there for the sake of understanding however. That’s why interpretation is so important.

Now, does that let us off the hook? Of course not, but it does get at the root of things. We can only love our enemy, turn the other cheek, and pray for those who hate us if and only when we are living out our identity as the followers of Jesus as God intends us to do and be. When we do that, we tend also to live the harder way and choose to do the hard thing, even against our instincts.

### **Slide 3: Waterlily**

Perhaps the best example I’ve seen of what Jesus means by living our God given identity and purpose is from a book called *Waterlily* by Ella Cara Deloria. In it, one of the elders of the Yankton Sioux Tribe tells the oral history of the intertribal murder of a young man in their village.

\*The relatives of the victim angrily debate the punishment they will inflict on the murderer

when he is caught. At the end of the debate, the oldest relative rises to speak. He agrees that the murder should be avenged with the death of the murderer. That would be justice. That would be an eye for an eye:

‘But, then, after a pause, he says, “Yet there is a better way. That the fire of hate may not burn on in his heart or in ours, we shall take that better way, the harder way.”

He asked each of his relatives to go to their homes and bring their most prized possession as a gift to the murderer. “Though he has hurt us, we shall make him something to us, in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead your brother? Then this man shall be your brother. Or your uncle or cousin? From now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us.”

The family was stunned, but after a long and bitter silence, they came to accept his words.

They caught the murderer and brought him to the council. He did not try to run away; he knew he had killed a man and was ready to pay with his life. He

entered with eyes averted, steeling himself for the worst.

Instead, they offered him the pipe of peace, saying, "Smoke with these your new kinsmen seated here. For they have chosen to take you to themselves in place of one who is not here. By these presents which they have brought here for you, they would have you know that whatever love and compassion they had for him is now yours, forever."

As they said these words, tears began to course down the slayer's cheeks. "And you may be sure that he proved himself an even better kinsman than many who had right of birth, because the price of his redemption had come so high."

The elder concludes, "You may well imagine how proud must have been the spirit of the slain youth, to see his relatives doing the harder thing!"\*\*

#### **Slide 4: Jesus said, What?**

Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect means that we are to live out our purpose and identity as children of God. When we live out that purpose, we choose the harder way, knowing that some days, it may seem

impossible, against our human and sinful desires, against our anger, and against our need to have revenge against another.

Hard? You bet. That's why it's the Harder Way, but to take our Lord's words seriously, we must practice doing them, even if it takes a lifetime to get to the point.

So, here is my question to you...What is getting in your way of living out your God given identity and purpose - telos - that Greek word that is often translated as perfect? How are you not living out the identity God has called you to live?

- Do you need to pray for someone whom you dislike?
- Are you angry with a situation in your life?
- Are you too busy to consider others around you?
- Are there marital problems, or problems you have with a teen in your life?
- Are you overwhelmed with financial troubles, health bills, losing your house?
- Are you finding it hard to forgive or accept others?

In what ways are you finding it hard to live the identity God

intended for you? For, by identifying what it is, you are closer to living the harder way Jesus speaks of, not from a moralistic view, but because God loves you and wants for you to live a life of complete purpose.

### **Slide 5: HWLF**

At the children's time, I gave a bracelet to each child to help them live the harder way. The bracelet has the acronym HWLF, which stands for He Would Love First. I invite you to take one of these bracelets home today and wear it to help you, especially if you find it difficult to live this way in today's political climate. It's a reminder that even though people may often be unkind, angry, hateful and other things to us, scripture would teach us that Jesus would choose to respond to unkindness with kindness, hate with love, violence with non-violence, and vengeance with reconciliation.

And, why would we strive to do that? Well, because in today's reading, he tells us to live that way and he also shows us that he lived that way in his response to his enemies, through his death, and ultimately through his Resurrection. He showed us that

he values every human, even the most reviled and hateful ones, something that is very difficult for us to swallow and live out, but is exactly how we are to live despite our natural tendencies.

### **Slide 6: Love your enemies**

Living the harder way starts today. Give it all up to Christ, who was and is the ultimate example of living this way, and who calls us to do the same. Let's try to live this harder way together. Amen.

*\*Waterlily - A Novel by Ella Cara Deloria (1988)*