

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

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By Haley Jones

Introduction

Jesus' preaching of the Sermon on the Mount continues to put us at odds with the offerings of the world. This week's challenge announces a new way of encountering our enemies and living in relationship with those who might cause us the most grief, anxiety, or pain. Think about your own relationships, both past and present, as you read today. Have you ever experienced the fruits of an unexpected relationship? How did it develop? Have you ever 'gone the extra mile' despite your initial unwillingness? How did it reshape your understanding of the one you served? Reflect on these questions in a few moments of silence before exploring the wisdom of the text. Open your heart to possible transformation through reflection on your personal experience and a movement of the Spirit.

Text

"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. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And 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.

Comment

Jesus is challenging the notion of *lex taliones*, the Hebrew understanding of an eye for an eye, that is present throughout the Hebrew Bible. The kingdom of God that Jesus is preaching is pushing against the system of retaliation of ancient Israel with a new way of being that raises the question, "How must we respond to "the other" in our lives?" Feminist liberation theologian, Myra Rivera Rivera argues that in the other, the one that is different from ourselves, we can find a sense of wonder, a sense of awe. That sense of wonder is the transcendence of God—something that

we cannot fully grasp, something that cannot be confined by our basic human language. The possibilities of new relationship with those who are different from us, those whom we have feared because they don't fit into our own understanding, are innumerable and most certainly transformative. Jesus is challenging us here to engage with our "enemy" in a new way, which arguably includes the other—the one with whom we disagree, the one who has harmed us, or the one who sits on the margins of our own circles of comfort.

The challenge of engagement and encounter is bound within the call to, "Be perfect as God is perfect." Who are we called to be in the world? We live in a perfection driven society that struggles with failure, so what happens if we don't measure up? Being perfect in our love for another as God has loved us requires practice which ultimately requires encounter. We must navigate the sensitivities of human existence *with* one another. We must approach the messiness of life with the remembrance of the worth and dignity because of the imago Dei of all people, including the other, the enemy. Our understanding of imago Dei does not mask our individuality that makes us unique but rather celebrates the diversity that has shaped the beautiful world in which we live. Jesus' call to go the extra mile was not for a friend with whom we have the most confidence in or have the utmost respect for but the one who challenged our existence. It was for the one who disregarded our own humanity. Celebrating Imago dei, and loving wholeheartedly in the world, includes those with whom we struggle.

Response

There is a certain challenge to our personal security in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is calling us to sacrifice our time and resources (physical and consequently emotional) in order to serve those who we most often prefer to ignore, those who disregard our own worth and dignity. If our call is rooted in befriending, loving, and serving even those whom we feel least deserve it, where might God be calling for transformation in your own life?

–Are there any relationships in your life that could use more attention? How might that attention offer you new insight into someone you have failed to understand?

–How can your community be a place of welcome for those with whom you disagree? Can you create experiences that help you get to know 'the other'?

–Are you in conflict with someone with a different worldview? Find some time this week to engage them in conversation. Hear their story, tell your own, and then reflect on your initial misconceptions as well as the outcome of your encounter.

Prayer

God of Abounding Love,

You have called us to greater things in this world,

You have moved us away from retaliation to reconciliation,

Selfishness into humility, and individualism into community

Your call has challenged us to translate our fears into opportunities for holy transformation.

Lead us, O God, to act in a way that shows no question of your unconditional embrace.

In the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ, we pray,

Amen.