
Love your enemies?
Wesley Mimico United Church
February 23, 2014
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 5:38-48 and Matthew 17:1-9

Were you surprised to hear two gospel readings today? Well, you were not as surprised as I was! But I realized that next week is M and S Sunday, so I won't have the opportunity to preach because we have a guest speaker who will be speaking about care to seniors. And the week after that I am away for March break and you will get to engage with an Emmanuel College student, Fraser Williamson, during worship. But I didn't want to miss the chance to reflect on the second gospel reading - the so called "transfiguration of Christ" story. I also felt the need to include 2 gospel readings today because - to be blunt - I don't like the first one. Did anyone here like it? Can you even imagine liking it?

In the first reading, Jesus says, "if someone strikes your cheek, turn, and offer the other cheek." Is Jesus serious here? If someone hits me, I should simply offer a different body part for abuse? Is Jesus really encouraging us to be victims? And what about this one, "Give to everyone who begs from you." Really? Has Jesus ever been to downtown Toronto? Does Jesus actually know how many beggars there are? Moreover, aren't we supposed to encourage beggars to find other funding sources - like work - is Jesus really suggesting that we should enable poor people to stay poor?

I had a phone call this week from "Steve". Steve is a jeweller who is between jobs, and just needed to find a way to cover a 1 week interval before his next job started. And he needed bus fare to get to his new job - 2 weeks worth actually because once he started working he would not actually get paid for 2 more weeks. So really, he needed 3 weeks of support. But if he could just survive that period, his new job would start, he'd save up some money, and get his life back on track. Who could say "no" to that opportunity - the opportunity to help an unlucky but hard-working fellow get back on his feet?

With the words of Jesus ringing in my ears, “give to anyone who begs from you”, I told Steve that I really could not help him with any money. Why did I refuse to help Steve? Well, to make a long story short, I met Steve over 2 years ago in Scarborough, and he has called me three times between then and now, and his story is always exactly the same. He is always 1 week away from his next job. And as always, I tell him that I have no money for him, but that if he wants to chat I will buy him lunch and give him some of my time. I’ve only eaten with Steve once.

Did I do the right thing? Can I justify myself by saying that I didn’t want to enable Steve? If Jesus had answered the phone instead of me - would the story have had a different ending? If only Jesus had qualified his bold statement - I can suggest lots of qualifiers: “give to any who are worthy”, “give to any who actually have a real job offer in their future”. Or - as we regularly hear - “give to any if they are not wasting their money on cigarettes, drugs, or alcohol”. No such luck. Jesus simply says, “give to any who ask”.

Or take another example. “If someone forces you to go with them one mile, go with them two miles.” Scholars believe this idea comes from the belief that in Jesus’s day, Romans could force indigenous people to carry the Roman’s load for 1 mile. It was understood by all - 1 mile. Jesus is saying that if a Roman official forces you to join them for 1 mile, that you should join them for 2 miles. Does that sound realistic to you? Perhaps Luke’s story fits here.

Luke was arrested for public mischief and put into a state prison. I’m not just sure what year it was, but this was back when American prisons still used inmates as road work crews. The days were long, the work was tough. But like all humans, Luke became accustomed to his surrounding, to the work routine and to life in prison. Every morning the “bosses” would herd the inmates onto trucks and take them out to a piece of road, and give them their assigned duty for the day. But on one day, “boss Paul” gave the crew a very demanding task - the crew were given a whole road to tar. This was manual work of course, a very physically demanding job. But Luke convinces the other inmates that they

should put a lot of energy into the task, and finish the job ahead of schedule. And they do. The inmates finish taring the road about 2 hours ahead of schedule. Why did they do it? Partly, they wanted to prove to the guards that they still have some independence, that they could still make decisions. But of course, the main reason they did it was to prove their independence to themselves!

The inmates were forced to re-tar a road, so they did it in bang-up style and fast. That's going the extra mile. That scene from the movie "Cool Hand Luke" is a modern version of Jesus's statement that we should go the extra mile when we are forced to go one mile.

Is this just bravado? Is this just trying to exert personal agency in a situation that is highly controlled? Is this just a more elaborate version of that phrase popularized in movies - "You can't fire me - I quit!"?

All of these uncomfortable requests made by Jesus have something in common. "Do not resist an evil doer". "Turn the other cheek", "Give your cloak", "go the second mile". "Give to everyone". "Love your enemy". All of these instructions are telling us that we need to make ourselves vulnerable to other people. We are to be open to the needs of others. But we are not to see ourselves as victims, because we choose to be vulnerable of our own free will. We have to be content to lose control. To let the needs of other people dominate our dreams and visions. To serve the wants of others, even if their wants are misguided. It's almost as if Jesus is telling us not to judge others in the first place.

[tough one - love your enemies - what does that mean?]

Whenever I hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, I always wonder - what actually happened on that mountain. What would we have seen if we had been there ourselves? One interpretation is that Jesus looked different to the disciples because Jesus changed. The story is certainly written that way. Matthew says, "And Jesus was

transfigured before the disciples, and Jesus's face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white" The story as written certainly suggests that Jesus changed, or at least his appearance changed.

But perhaps Jesus looked different to the disciples because the disciples were themselves changed. Perhaps it was the disciples' ability to see that changed. Did Jesus's body physically change, or was it that John, James, and Peter could now see the face of God shining through the man that they thought they already knew well? Who was changed that day? Jesus? Or the disciples?

And if the disciples vision changed on that day, did their new ability to see come down from the mountain with them when they finally descended? When they left the mountain to return to everyday life, did the disciples take their new capacity to see into the valleys of their world? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in Jesus when they were not on the mountain? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in other people? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in each other.

And what would be the bigger miracle? Jesus's body physically changing? Or the disciples - who were ordinary people like us - having a new vision to see the face of God in the everyday world?

We have a choice. We always have a choice. Like the disciples, we can choose to immortalize some very important part of our life. To try to maintain that image. To try to preserve that image. Or, we can take the risk to look with new eyes, we can set our vision forwards, to an unknown future, we can take a chance on seeing the face of God in our own world. We can take a chance on seeing the face of God in each other.

Who knows, perhaps we will even be able to imagine a world - see a world - be a world - where we turn the other cheek. Where we offer our coats. Where we go the second mile. Where we love our enemies.

We can take a chance on seeing the face of God in each other. Let's take that chance.

Amen.