

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock in troubled times and our redeemer.

These are troubling times we are living through. All around us we see resistance - one group against another. In light of that, the words we just heard coming from our gracious and wise Lord Jesus are really difficult to digest. He says, "Do not resist an evildoer." Ouch! What are we to do with this reading?

These past few Sundays we have heard hard sayings from Matthew's gospel that come from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. This was an event that was meant to instruct the disciples who followed Jesus in a new way of understanding how to live in right relationship with God. The people Jesus was speaking to were Jewish and they understood that relationship through worship of God that was grounded in the law of Moses. The people he was speaking to included his twelve disciples and the thousands of people who had followed them up the mount. Thousands had followed them in order to catch a glimpse of Jesus, strain to hear his words and perhaps to be healed by them.

Jesus likely chose to climb that mount with the intent of drawing a physical parallel to Moses, the Hebrew prophet who came before him. Moses, you might recall, climbed the mountain in order to meet with and hear from God. Whether Jesus's followers were conscious of the parallel in the climb we are not sure. But we can be sure that they picked up on the Moses parallel with the opening words of the reading from today. Let me read those words again. "Jesus said, "You have heard it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.'" The disciples and any of the followers who could hear Jesus speaking would have recognized those words from the ancient Hebrew tradition. They are words that come from the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy - the books that contain the Hebrew Law. This was the law that the

Hebrew priests and scribes of Jesus's day were bound to, the law that the Hebrew people were encouraged to follow to the letter.

But it is important that you know a couple of things about the phrase "an eye for an eye" in order to get at what Jesus is saying here. That portion of the law was established in order to set boundaries for the people's actions and reactions towards each other. There is no mistaking that the ancient Hebrew peoples lived in dangerous and volatile times. God had chosen these people to be His people because beginning with Abraham they were willing to listen for God to guide them. They were intentional about building a relationship with God. As they grew together as a nation, their relationship with God grew, too. This law, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," set limits meant to prevent the escalation of retaliation within their community. The expectation was that if someone punched your eye out or knocked your tooth out, that was the limit of what you could do in response. If instead someone punched your eye out and you torched their house, you'd be breaking the law and would have to pay the consequences.

But that was then. In this new paradigm, Jesus wanted the disciples to recognize that he wasn't setting out to abolish that law but rather his intention was to reinterpret the law through the perspective of God's heart because Jesus was the manifestation of God's heart in the flesh. So Jesus says to them, "You have heard it said, 'And eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.'" Whoa. Don not resist? What in the world could Jesus mean by that? Isn't it human instinct to want to resist evil? Isn't resisting evil a promise we make in our baptismal covenant?

It certainly is our call as Christians to resist evil and we know that we need God's help to do that. But here Jesus is not speaking of the existence of evil itself. He is specifically talking about resisting the evildoer. He is talking our human to human

responses to each other. When he says not to resist an evildoer, I understand resist in the context of fighting back with physical or verbal force. Our instinct is to give back to our foe, our perceived enemies, as much or more as he or she has thrust at us. That is what Jesus was asking his disciples to reconsider and what he wants us to reconsider as well.

Essentially, Jesus wants his followers to resist mirroring their attackers in the form of their response. He wants us to learn to be strong enough in our faith that God is with us that we can endure the pain of the attack; that we can endure the emotional or physical pain of it without striking back; that we can turn and walk away from it, refusing the invitation to engage. When someone strikes us on the right cheek, Jesus wants us to take a breath, find our rootedness in our faith, and while standing firm offer our left cheek as well. The inner strength that comes from our firm foundation in God allows us to choose to open ourselves to that vulnerability. In coming into the world as a tiny, human infant God was revealed as being willing to make himself vulnerable to the hurts and the pain of the world. And God continues to “turn the other cheek” over and over and over again in the face of our the lack of humanity’s commitment to God.

Through Christ’s resurrection we know that God can and will overcome the dark forces and oppressive powers of the world. We know from scripture and from history that those forces and powers are not overturned overnight. It takes time. But we can see that through persistent faithful action, the arc of history does tend to bend toward justice. Though we know we have much more to accomplish, we have seen much progress. That arc of justice does not move in a straight line, it endures peaks of progress and valleys of regressions. Nevertheless, the trajectory can be seen to move slowly, often frustratingly so, toward the coming of the kingdom of God.

The gospel calls us to immerse ourselves in our faith, trusting that God will guide us through good times and bad. The challenge before us is to allow ourselves to disengage from the anxiety and anger in the world and to open ourselves up to the way of Jesus. To be Christ like is to respond to those whom we perceive as enemies with a deep rooted love that grows out of faith. In order to take this scripture seriously, it is important that we consider just who our enemies are and how we are responding to them. Is an enemy someone who wishes you harm or wishes people that you care about harm? Is an enemy someone who thinks differently than you; someone with whom you just cannot agree? Is an enemy someone who slanders you or insults you?

The hard truth is that no matter who our enemies are, we are called not to resist them in a way that furthers the animosity. We are called to love them as God loves them; and God *does* love them as much as God loves us. We are called to keep them in our prayers.

At the close of the reading today, this portion of Matthew's gospel quotes Jesus who says to his disciples, "Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." I have to admit that I do not believe that I am capable of perfection, especially not the perfection that is our God. But I do not think that is what Jesus intended. The Bible used for our lectionary reading translates the Greek word *telos* to mean perfect. But our understanding of the word 'perfect' does not capture the real essence of the word *telos*. The word *telos* conveys the meaning of a sense of *completion*, meeting an *intended goal* or *determined end*. Jesus is really asking his disciples to "Persist in your faith in God, as your heavenly Father persists in his faith in you."

The Bible is full of models of persistence in faith: Moses hung in there from the burning bush through to the edge of the Promised Land, the prophets persisted in bearing

God's message in spite of the world's refusing to hear them, the woman with a flow of blood persisted in touching Jesus' garment in spite of being forbidden by society to touch anyone, Jesus' mother Mary persisted at the wedding at Cana. There are many more. But there are modern examples, too. The women who persisted to obtain the right to vote and Martin Luther King, Jr. in his quest for civil rights, they had faith in God's justice. Sen. Elizabeth Warren has been acknowledged for her persistence in speaking at a hearing because she thought it was the just thing to do, and most recently our presiding Bishop Michael Curry has persisted in bringing a new view of evangelism into the Episcopal Church because his faith leads him to a desire to reclaim that word in the spirit of God's grace.

Remember that our one God persistently loves us and pursues us relentlessly. He revealed to the whole world in Christ's death and resurrection that what those who perceive themselves as powerful and mighty will be brought low by what they deem to be powerless and weak; that God works to overcome the oppressive powers of the world through the power of human faith and commitment to God in Christ. May the love of God that is persistently working to enter and change our hearts be received by us this day and every day.