

Matthew 5:38-48^{vi}

Jesus said, "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."

⁠ About the Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48

Today's reading presents the last two of the six antitheses (5:21-48). The fifth antithesis (5:38-42) amends the limiting letter of the law in favor of a spirit of generosity and forbearance. The principle of retaliation (Exodus 21:24) was originally intended to limit the pursuit of boundless vengeance in a blood feud. Jesus' command is to forego all acts of retaliation.

Jesus' asks the disciples not to resist the insulting back-handed slap, to allow a creditor to take not only their coat (the undergarment) but even their cloak (the heavy overgarment), to go an extra mile when the Roman troops forced them to carry their gear, and to make their resources readily available to those in need.

The final antithesis, on love of one's enemies, is the most challenging of all. Jesus' quote

echoes Leviticus 19:18 which commands the love of neighbor, but there is no command to hate one's enemies, which justifies doing evil to them. The call to "be perfect" echoes Leviticus 19:2. The word "perfect" translates a Hebrew concept meaning "be complete, whole, undivided, and conforming to God's will."

^{vi} **Reflection and Response**

Peace activist Hildegard Goss-Mayr tells the story of the Russian army entering her village during World War II. Because the soldiers were victorious and hungry, everyone expected them to loot and destroy. Yet, when they pounded on her unlocked door, her father opened it and welcomed them like guests. He invited his family to create an atmosphere of trust for the dreaded Russians. Accordingly, the soldiers did not plunder or rape but, seeing that the family were weak and thin, they shared their own meager supply of food.

Why does it surprise us to hear the words of today's gospel thus translated into actuality? When Jesus challenges us to surpass the law of vengeance, it is rare that anyone responds. It is more likely for us to sympathize with the underground forces who bomb the occupying army, the police who kill the murderer, or the victim who secures his revenge. At movies where the bad guy gets his due, we applaud heartily.

These natural inclinations point up the distance between God's perspective and ours. God's gifts come as generously to the undeserving as they do to the deserving. And yet, Jesus reminds us, in God's design, no logical calculations compute. God always throws in a surprise twist and comes with utterly unexpected largesse. All we can hope to do is share in God's goodness. But it is inspiring to know that vast reserves of divine goodness exist and that we are called to participate in them. We can never reach the end of God's love; we are always called to a higher perfection.

Quietly consider:

What "coat" can I give away? Where can I walk an extra mile? What "enemies" can I love?

Prayer Starter

Help me, God, to remember that I am a temple for your Spirit and am called to holiness...