

“Stepping On”
Matthew 5:38-48
February 19, 2017

Getting even. We’ve all done that before and we know how good it can feel. Sadly, though, it comes all too naturally for us, doesn’t it? Think back to your childhood and you may remember someone who was the class bully who constantly picked on the same people until finally someone had enough and they took revenge on the bully usually in the form of a fight. Of course, as students, we didn’t try to stop the fight, we usually gathered around and started cheering for the student, who had been picked on, to beat up the bully. Think about your driving over the past month and that person who cut you off on the freeway. You’re going to teach him/her a lesson, aren’t you? You’re going to let them know how you feel.

I have a cousin who lives in northern Wisconsin, who loves to work on cars as a hobby. He’ll buy about 9-10 old, beat up cars every year, fix them up, and then sell them for a small profit. One time he proudly told me a story about how he got even with someone who cut him off on the road. He said he followed this person to the local mall and parked right next to him, and then got out of the car to tell the guy that he was not happy with the way he had cut him off. They argued for a little while and then went their separate ways into the mall. A little while later my cousin came back to his car and noticed a large dent on the drivers’ side door, and the guy who cut him off earlier – his car was gone. Convinced that the guy who cut him off earlier had dented his car, he went looking for the man’s car in the parking lot and sure enough he found it. According to my cousin he saw a large scratch on this man’s car with some paint on the car the same color as his car. So my cousin then took his car and rammed it into the other man’s car, causing great damage to both cars, and then he left a note on the man’s windshield that simply said, “We’re even,” and he drove away.

I’m sure we could all come up with examples of how we got even with people or how life isn’t fair, but what would be the point? Our Gospel lesson for today makes it clear that God allows the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. In other words, bad things happen to both good and bad people, and good things happen to both those who deserve it and those who don’t. Life isn’t fair. But here’s the problem with these words of Jesus about revenge: We can learn them, study them, and memorize them, but when we come face to face with someone who picks on us or someone who cuts us off in traffic or someone who hurts us, many times those words seem to disappear. After all, what was Jesus thinking when He said in Verse 44 to “love our enemies?” There are times when we find it difficult to love even our friends and closest relatives. The problem with Jesus’ teaching in our Gospel text is that it just doesn’t fit with our experiences in the world. So what do we do with these words?

In Jesus’ day when He spoke the words of Verse 38, repeating the laws that God had handed down to His people in the book of Exodus and Leviticus, by saying, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” the Pharisees and the teachers of the law regarded them as a formula for personal revenge to be used against all people. But that is not what Jesus meant. When God gave them to the Israelites in the OT, they were intended to be used by the courts as a way of stating that a punishment should fit a crime and should not be excessive. So Jesus never intended for them to be applied literally. Rather, Jesus’ words that follow in Verses 39-40 address how He would have His followers conduct themselves in their dealings with others. While revenge may be our natural response when wronged by another, Jesus calls on us to do what’s not natural by “turning the other cheek” and “going the extra mile.” And no doubt after Jesus’ suffering on the cross, His death, and resurrection, Jesus’ disciples would have recognized these actions in Jesus himself, who endured insults from people, but never shouted back at them; and who was beaten by soldiers and put to death, but prayed for God to forgive them.

Sometimes when we hear these words of Jesus we make the mistake in thinking that in order to follow Jesus these are things we have to do – we have to walk the extra mile, we have to turn the other cheek, and we have to give up our tunic or cloak. But that is not what Jesus is saying. What He is saying is that when you are free from anger, hatred, and evil; when revenge does not live in your heart, then these are the things you will want to do. You will love others so much that you will want what is truly good for them. You will want to walk the second mile, you will want to turn the other cheek, and you will want to give to those who ask of you. Jesus is not laying out another set of rules we have to follow. He’s simply illustrating for us what a forgiven, transformed heart/life looks like.

But here's the challenge. How do we apply this, how do you become that kind of person when you're facing an angry boss, or criticism from others, or some kind of injustice? How do you keep stepping on, how do you continue to follow God when life just doesn't seem to be fair. You pray, you attend worship, you try to serve God by loving others, but then you lose your job, health issues strike your family, your car breaks down, and all of a sudden you are struggling to make ends meet. Where is God when your life seems to be falling apart? Tom & Cindy Elliott have been through this. There was a time when for them life just didn't seem fair. They loved God, but they were hurting. I would like to invite them to come forward to tell you how they kept going (stepping on) when their lives were filled with great uncertainty.

When you look at all the things Jesus wants us to do in this text – turn the other cheek, share with others, go the extra mile; we all know that we do not do these things perfectly. We fail all the time. And then if you go the last verse of our text, Verse 48, it says, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” it is very tempting to think, we might as well give up. Not only do we fail to do many of those things Jesus mentioned, but we'll never be perfect. But when you understand that turning the other cheek, loving your enemies, trusting Jesus when things look bleak, and striving for perfection does not lie within our own efforts, but within Jesus himself who lived a perfect life for us and died our death for us, then you will see the world from a different perspective, where Jesus not only says, “I forgive you,” but also, “I want to live in you.” And that's what Tom & Cindy experienced, Jesus living in them to assure them that He understood their situation, He was with them, and would provide and care for them even in the midst of great uncertainty.

With Jesus living within us, we can invest our lives in the ways of God by turning the other cheek rather than spending our lives trying to seek revenge, we can love one another – even our enemies, and we can trust in God's care and provision, even when life seems unfair. That is the ultimate lifestyle, but it is not a natural lifestyle. The natural lifestyle is to put ourselves first, but God doesn't call us to live naturally. In our Building To Serve campaign, we are looking to do something that is unnatural: Giving sacrificially, not for ourselves, but for others in our community that they may have a place to come and experience God's love and forgiveness in order for their lives to be transformed. But again, we can't do this on our own. Only with Jesus living within us can we truly live, love, and give as unnaturally as He does.