

Rights

Matthew 5:38-48

Whitefish UMC

February 20, 2011

- † Mark Twain once said this about the Bible: “I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don’t understand. It’s those parts of the Bible I do understand that give me fits.” One contemporary scholar puts the teachings that Harold just read into the category of what she calls “sketchy scenes.” Amen sister.
- † Baptist preacher James Merritt writes: “What Jesus says is totally antithetical to the typical attitude in America. Years ago there was a bumper sticker that became rather popular that simply said two words: "I Want." Now that tag would fit on just about every car in America. We live in the country of "I want." I want my rights; I want my happiness; I want my way; I want my money.
- † Rights are considered as American as apple pie. This is a country where citizens have rights. The best known part of the Constitution is the Bill of Rights. I'm all for the right kind of rights, but today rights don't so much protect the innocent as they promote the guilty. If you're going to be a real Christian you're going to have to give up some rights.”
- † I don’t know about you, but that kind of talk calls for some humor. And if you’ve been reading the letters to the editor in the Daily Interlake or listening to the news from our legislature, heaven knows we need it. All this talk about rights reminds me of this good old joke:

- † “What’s this?” Why it’s Pastor Debbie exercising her rights!!
- † Of course that brings me to all the discussion in our country and our state about the second amendment to the Constitution. Did you know that there is one thing that the Obama’s and the Tea Partiers can agree on? You’ve seen Michelle Obama’s preference for sleeveless dresses, right? Certainly these usual opponents can mutually adhere to the right to bare arms. That’s B-A-R-E. Back to a story told by the Baptist preacher.
- † “Bill Walton learned that to play basketball for John Wooden you had to give up some rights. Coach Wooden had a rule against facial hair. If you played for him no facial hair was allowed. After a ten day break from school, Bill Walton came to practice wearing a beard. Coach Wooden walked up to him and said, "Bill, have you forgotten something?" Walton replied, "Coach, if you mean the beard, I think I should be allowed to wear it, it's my right."
- † Coach Wooden said, "Do you really believe in that?" He said, "Yes, I do, very much." Coach Wooden looked at him and said, "Bill, I have great respect for individuals who stand up for those things in which they believe. I really do. If you believe that is your right, I would die for your right to defend that right." Bill Walton said, "Thank you, Coach." Then Wooden said, "I just want you to know the team is really going to miss you."
- † That story illustrates an important principle: Be quick to defend others, but be slow to defend yourself. Abraham Lincoln once said, “I never give an explanation of my actions to my critics.” He said the reason is simple. “My friends don’t need an explanation and my enemies wouldn’t believe it.”
- † “Turn the other cheek.” “Go the extra mile.” “Love your enemies.” “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.” Lovely phrases from the Sermon on the Mount. But most Christians find these commands impossible

and even offensive. How can we be perfect? More importantly, how can we live in the real world with these inherently counter cultural rules?

- † The other afternoon after Jim Mechem practiced with Dawn, we got into a lively discussion about this passage—complete with shouts of glee and hand slaps. Dawn said, “I feel like I’ve just been to three weeks of Bible class in three minutes!” So I want to share with you some of Jim’s insights, because he is too modest to do it himself.
- † When we hear, “Be perfect” we think, “but that’s not possible!” We are human, with accompanying frailties. So we tend to dismiss these statements of Jesus with “Well Jesus, easy for you to say—you’re the Son of God.” And we’re not. Our therapists tell us: “Don’t have a Messiah complex—you don’t have to be the savior of the world.”
- † But as Jim pointed out, the Greek word used in the Gospel means not perfect as in without a flaw, but grown up, mature, complete. John Wesley understood this distinction. He reminds us that God asks us to love as God loves.
- † And this is not advice that dooms us to failure—a word of judgment meant to drive us into the arms of grace. Instead we are called to turn the other cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy—because that is how God loves.
- † And this cannot be done out of our own resources—we can’t do it without God!! So this is no admonition to try harder—if it were, it would for sure be a recipe for despair. As Jason Byassee, a young United Methodist preacher and writer says, “It is a plan of action rooted in the promise to made ‘children of the Father in heaven’ (v. 45).
- † The Sermon on the Mount here and elsewhere is a very portrait of the heart of God, who loves the unlovable, comes among us in Christ, suffers our

worst, and rises to forgive us....If you want to follow this God, fleshed in Jesus Christ, you will be adopted into a life in which you find yourself loving this way before you know what you are doing.”

- † “A hallmark of John Wesley’s Methodist revival and the variety of Holiness movements he spurred (Nazarene, Holiness, Assemblies of God) was the great seriousness with which they took Jesus’ command in [this passage] to be perfect. Why would Jesus command such a thing if it were impossible?”
- † Last night Garrison Keillor, in his Lake Wobegon monologue, commented on this scripture. He said, in effect, “Well Jesus, you’re on the Mount, but we’re down here—we can’t do it!” Then he said something about the meek inheriting the earth, but it’s turned out all they got were Minnesota and North Dakota....Oh well.
- † ...But perfection does not mean always choosing the right fork at the dinner table, nor does it mean attaining to such divine attributes as omniscience [being everywhere for everyone]. It means loving as God loves, with every breath God gives us. Impossible? Too much?”
- † Hear these words of John Wesley: “God well knew how ready our unbelief would be to cry out, This is impossible! And therefore stakes upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of God, to whom all things are possible.”
- † May we close with this true story that I read when I was in seminary in a book entitled Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us, by Joyce Hollyday. It has stayed with me and inspired me since I first heard it.
- † “Sarah Corson, a founder of Servant in Faith and Technology (SIFAT) in Alabama, was on a mission to set up an agricultural project in a village in South America where she and her husband had earlier started a church and built a fish hatchery. She was with seventeen young people, including two of

her sons. One Thursday night, around midnight, thirty soldiers rushed toward the house where they were all staying. Sarah was paralyzed with shock as the soldiers stormed over the clearing leading to the house. She remembered with fear that earlier that day, a neighbor had overheard a conversation near the military camp in which soldiers had blamed Americans for recent resistance to a military takeover of the country. The soldiers had vowed to exterminate all Americans in the region.

† Sarah Corson prepared to die. But as the soldiers approached, she found herself offering them warm words of welcome. The commander shoved his rifle against her stomach and pushed her into the house. The soldiers began pulling everything off the shelves and out of drawers. Sarah calmly explained that she and the others were there only to set up projects and teach the Bible. The commander, stating that he had never read the Bible, said, ‘Maybe it is a communist book, for all I know.’ Sarah asked him to let her talk about it.

† While he kept his gun pointed at her and the other soldiers continued ransacking the house, Sarah opened a Spanish Bible to the Sermon on the Mount. She read about Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies.

† ‘That’s humanly impossible!’ the commander shouted.

† ‘That’s true, sir,’ she answered. ‘It isn’t humanly possible, but with God’s help it is possible.’ She challenged him to let her prove it by killing her slowly: ‘Cut me to pieces little by little, and you will see you cannot make me hate you. I will die praying for you because God loves you.’

† The commander lowered his gun and stepped back. Then he ordered everyone in the house to march to a truck. But before they reached the truck, he turned around and led the women back to the house. He told Sarah that the women would be raped repeatedly in the jungle camp, so he could not

take them there. He also told her that this was the first time he had disobeyed an order from a superior officer—and that he would pay with his life if he were found out. He said as he left, ‘I could have fought any amount of guns you might have had, but there is something here I cannot understand. I cannot fight it.’

- † The village waited in agony for word of the men who had been taken. The local people insisted that the church service not be held on Sunday, because soldiers considered any gathering a source of political agitation. But on Saturday night, a messenger arrived with word from the commander of the attack that he would be in church on Sunday. He wanted Sarah to come and get him; if she did not, he would walk the ten miles. It sounded to Sarah like a threat. She sent a message throughout the town that night. ‘We will have the service after all,’ she said, ‘but you are not obligated to come. In fact you may lose your life by coming. No one knows what this soldier will do. Do not come when the church bell rings unless you are sure God wants you to come.’
- † Sarah picked up the commander and his bodyguard at the military camp. Holding their rifles they marched coldly into the church and sat down. The church was packed before the first hymn was over. The people came in fear and trembling, but they came.
- † It was the church custom to welcome visitors by inviting them to the platform, singing a welcome song, and waving to them. Then the congregation would line up to shake the visitors’ hands, embrace them, and offer a personal greeting. Sarah decided only to offer the commander and his bodyguard the song. Stunned to be invited up front, the two soldiers stood with their guns across their backs.

- † The people sang weakly and waved timidly. But then, the first man on the front seat came forward and put out his hand. As he bent over to hug the soldiers, Sarah overheard him saying, ‘Brother, we don’t like what you did to our village, but this is the house of God, and God loves you, so you are welcome here.’ Every person in the church followed his example, even the women whose eyes were red from weeping for their loved ones whom the commander had taken prisoner.
- † The commander was incredulous. He marched to the pulpit and said, ‘Never have I dreamed that I could raid a town, come back, and have that town welcome me as a brother.’ Pointing to Sarah, he said, ‘That sister told me Thursday night that Christians love their enemies, but I did not believe her then. You have proven it to me this morning. . . I never believed there was a God before, but what I have just felt is so strong that I will never doubt the existence of God as long as I live.’
- † The commander stayed for lunch with the congregation and offered money from his own pocket to parishioners who had loved ones taken away. Two weeks later, all of the men who had been taken were released from the basement cell where they had been imprisoned and some had been tortured.
- † Sarah Corson was overcome with gratitude to God for putting divine love in her heart for a person she could not love on her own. She remembers the last words the commander said to her: ‘I have fought many battles and killed many people. It was nothing to me. It was just my job to exterminate them. But I never knew them personally. This is the first time I ever knew my enemy face to face. And I believe that if we knew each other, our guns would not be necessary.’”
- † It’s true—not all such stories end this way—with a happy ending.

† God has given us rights—to choose how we will live. As we exercise those rights, may it be our prayer that we choose to follow Jesus’ way of loving, even when the outcome is not guaranteed. We make that choice through the power of God’s spirit, in whom all things are indeed possible. Amen.

Sources:

Joyce Hollyday, Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 111-13.

Jayson Byassee, Feasting on the Word, 2010.

James Merritt, “Going the Second Mile,” <http://www.sermons.com>