



## Method: Our Wesleyan Way Worship Series

Sermon Title: "The More Excellent Way"

Matthew 5:38-48—23 February 2014

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

My brother is fond of saying that “we are a nation of victims.” A news story this week brought his words to mind. Virtually anyone who pays attention to the national news knows a Florida jury convicted Michael Dunn, on three charges of attempted second-degree murder for shooting into an SUV holding four black teenagers. This occurred in November 2012 when Dunn argued with Jordan Davis, 17, about the volume of his music. Dunn didn’t like it loud so he asked the teens to turn it down.

Evidently they did not comply. Dunn saw what he thought was the barrel of a gun sticking out of the Durango. Dunn lost control, firing 10 bullets, nine of which struck the SUV. Later, police found a basketball, basketball shoes, clothing, a camera tripod and cups inside the Durango, but no gun. What I thought most telling was when Dunn said: “I’m the [expletive deleted] victim here. I was the one who was victimized.” Like my brother said: “we are a nation of victims.” Jesus speaks in this part of the Sermon on the Mount about what victims are to do. Hear the day’s lesson:

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 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. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?



47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:38-48).

Many who hear Jesus' words seem befuddled by the degree of moral conduct Jesus expects. Some choose discipleship casually and pay little heed to their baptismal vows. Others hear Jesus fairly clearly, then consider options, and eventually move into discipleship with fear and trembling. Finally some, hearing in Jesus' words a too narrow path discover an insufficient willingness for such a life, turn sadly away. Where are we on the discipleship continuum?

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, then you are a victim. If anyone wants to sue you, then you are a victim. If anyone wants to take your coat, then you are a victim. If anyone forces you to go one mile, then you are a victim . . . and so on. Jesus speaks and teaches here to victims. Yet he gives us an alternative to the common sense 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' that we have come to embrace. Originally, the "eye for an eye" was not about severity of punishment. Rather it concerned comparative justice—not simply retribution. It kept people from burning your crops if your child accidentally plucked one of their flowers.

We are people who always see ourselves as violated or taken advantage of one way or another. Have you ever noticed that when an officer pulls you over for a clear traffic violation we think to say to the officer: "Too bad you cannot go after real criminals?" Charles Sykes, author of *A Nation of Victims*, suggests that the phrase "It's not my fault" has become the loudest and most influential voice in America, an instrument of political change. Here are a couple of amusing examples:



\* Fired for consistently showing up late for work, a former school district employee sues, claiming he is a victim of “chronic lateness syndrome.”

\* Videotaped puffing on a pipe filled with crack cocaine, Washington, D.C., Mayor Marion Barry claims he is a victim of racism.

The dream of every victim is retaliation, but Jesus does not offer this alternative, although it is part of the Hebrew scripture teaching Jesus sums up as “You have heard that it was said . . . .” As Gene Davenport writes:

Jesus, in effect, removes another permission or the Old Age. He teaches that disciples are not to take a stand over against one who has done them a wickedness. As it is usually pointed out, in its strictest form, this teaching calls for disciples not to take legal steps to take revenge on those who have offended them in some way. In this respect, it is close to that portion of 1 Corinthians in which Paul admonishes his followers not to take one another to court before the secular, government officials, but simply to endure unjust wrong . . . .

Jesus removes all permission for retaliation . . . . Moreover, in all four examples, (slapping, taking your coat, forcing one to go a mile, and begging), what Jesus calls forth is not merely the refusal to retaliate, but the positive act of offering more than is demanded (*Into the Darkness*, Abingdon Press, 1988, pp. 175-6).

Jesus’ teaching then speaks of love of enemy and Jesus’ intent seems consistent. We are to do the outwardly super-human if we want to be Jesus’ disciples and follow him to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the only way to true peace with an adversary—and Jesus knew this. The late Nelson Mandela said, “If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.”

Yet of all the difficult, if not impossible teachings Jesus lays on his people, the last verse of today’s lesson is the most troubling: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” How can we hear such a word? For those who really want to follow Jesus on the way what keeps us from



self-doubt, guilt, frustration, and a sense of futility? Do we wish or explain it away? Do we confess our absolute weakness in the face of this command and simply throw ourselves on God's mercy? Or is this command just for super-Christians?

Maybe this is more of a promise Jesus makes on behalf of God than it is an impossible command for us to keep. Maybe it is a promise that God fulfills in the next life, but a promise that we remain open to in this life—here and now. Knowing a bit about the Greek word for perfection helps us. Matthew uses “perfect” in a way we do not. Our 21st century use of “perfect” means “without fault or defect or “flawless.”

Yet, Matthew uses this Greek word “telos” as Aristotle did. *Telos/τέλος* means or defines the purpose for which something is created. Perfection in Jesus’ challenge does not mean a kind of flawless ethical perfection. Rather Matthew’s Jesus suggests that Christians seek a life that is mature, complete, full grown, and not partial.

Jesus command for perfection comes into focus and reasonable human expectations when regarded in context. First of all, the demand for perfection comes within Jesus’ teaching on relationships. Second, Jesus eliminates in his teaching on relationships that they be built on a double standard of love for neighbor and hatred for enemy. Jesus teaches that relationship determined by other persons is constructed on a false principle. In other words, our lives are not decided by either our friends or enemies, but rather our lives are established by God.

In sum, Jesus calls disciples to be God’s children in a similar manner: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This



means the gospel has freed us to love without prejudice, just as God loves. If we look at perfection from this angle then it is not only possible but actually realized whenever and wherever our relationships fall under God's control and divine sovereignty.

If we can stubbornly and persistently stick to this conception of being perfect, then we can grow into the disciples that Jesus needs in our world. Think of yourself like the lowly postage stamp: Its usefulness consists in the ability to stick to one thing till it gets there (Josh Billings). This is the more excellent way!

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