

7th Sunday after the Epiphany
"Letting Go of Hurt and Resentment"
Matthew 5:38-48

As I shared in the Children's Message this morning, some of Jesus' teachings are hard to understand. Today's Gospel is definitely one of those passages.

Here we are, at the pinnacle of the Sermon on the Mount, listening as Jesus commands his disciples – and us – to do some of the most difficult things imaginable:

- turn the other cheek
- don't retaliate
- love your enemies
- pray for those who persecute you

Tough stuff.

Hard to do, even in our best moments.

And then there's that last verse, the kicker: "Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect."

Good grief, does that really mean what it sounds like it means?

As tempting as it is to avoid that verse, I actually think we should start right there, "Be perfect. as your father in heaven is perfect."

When we hear that command, most of us hear Jesus calling us to a kind of moral perfectionism. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when we first started looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and I asked you if Jesus' sermon seemed like just another list of rules, things we should do and things we shouldn't do ?

And I mentioned that some commentators have done just that. They've tried to make this sermon into a code of moral conduct. And others have tried to make the "Beatitudes" into a formula for how to become healthy, wealthy, and wise.

But if we try to "moralize" the Beatitudes
Or if we try to moralize today's verse "Be perfect. as your Father in heaven is perfect."
we'd be missing the point.

So if this sermon is not just a list of moral teachings, what is it?

Do you remember?

Do you remember what stands at the center of this sermon, at the center of the Sermon on the Mount?

Here's a hint. Do you remember **who** stands at the center of this sermon?

That's right... Jesus!

The Good News that we see in the Beatitudes, is Jesus himself.

And the Good News that we see in today's Gospel, is Jesus.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is giving us a declaration
He is telling us whose side God is on.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit”

“Blessed are those who mourn”

“Blessed are the peacemakers”

Jesus declares us “blessed.” He gives us his blessing.

The Good News in Jesus' sermon is that God is at work in this world, bringing us his Kingdom.
God is at work entering the bad news of this world,
and filling those who suffer the most, with his blessing.

And he's doing the same thing in today's Gospel, as well.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus wants us to see a new world, a world filled with his blessings.

And in today's Gospel, Jesus also wants us to see a new world,
a world set free from revenge and violence.
a world in which the cycle of revenge can be broken.

Can that be true?

Can that happen in your life and mine?

Is it possible to actually love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us or wound us deeply?

Wouldn't that take a kind of perfection that is out of our reach?

That's an honest question.

But let's start by remembering who is standing at the center of this Sermon on the Mount.

Do you know what Jesus means by “perfect”?

In Greek, the word is “telos” which means "goal," or "purpose."

So when Jesus says, "Be telos. Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect."

He is talking about becoming what was intended for us,
accomplishing our God-given purpose.

The Bible paraphrase called The Message gets closer to the mark,
So instead of "Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect."
It reads: "You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity."

For me, that really gets to the root of the issue.

We can only break that cycle of revenge, repaying evil with good, forgiving and praying for those who harm us to the degree that we become who God created us to be.
With Christ living in us and through us.

And it all starts with living into our God-given identity as blessed and beloved children.

As they say, "You can't give what you don't have,"
and so it's essential that you know who you are:

 "that you are fearfully and wonderfully made"

 "that you are the apple of God's eye"

 "that Jesus loves you and died for you,

and that on the cross all of your sins were forgiven once and for all.

The Good news is that we who have experienced love can in turn share it with others.

We are free from the urge to hate and strike back.

We are free from our sinful nature, which is not our master.

And if sin is not our master, who is our Master?

It's Jesus – Jesus, the one who not only talked the talk of love, but walked the walk.

He went all the way to Jerusalem,

enduring the shame and humiliation of the cross,

embracing death itself,

all so that we might know, experience, and trust just how much God loves us.

I'd like to close this sermon this morning by asking you to join me in doing something
that I hope will help us each remember who we are in God's eyes.

On a piece of paper that we're going to hand out right now,

on the side that is blank I'd like you to write one fear,

one memory, one hurt, or resentment –

that keeps you from fully becoming the person God calls you to be.

And then, when you've written that down, (and only then)

Turn the paper over and read the message Jesus wants you to hear:

_____ (your name)

"You are God's beloved child.

Because you are loved,

Because you are living in my kingdom now, have no fear.

Let go of the desire to hate or strike back.

Let my love live in you. Be who you really are.

You are beloved.

Beloved, let us love one another."

Amen.