

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

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February 20, 2011

Matthew 5:38-48

Have you ever found some rope tangled and pulled into a hard knot? Then you work with it and work with it but you still can't get it apart? And instead of a small tight tangle you end up with a bigger and messier-looking tangle? That's the way I feel about the readings we've had for the last two Sundays, sections of the Sermon on the Mount as reported by Matthew. The passages are dense with not one but many difficult-to-understand statements:

"It's not enough that you don't commit murder, don't even have angry thoughts toward others."

"It's not enough that you don't commit adultery, don't even let a lustful thought cross your mind."

"If what your eye looks at is a problem, pluck it out." (OK, I know that's hyperbole, but it has—sadly—been taken literally by some.)

Those were last week's challenges. Now we have this week's:

"If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn and give him the other."

"If someone compels you to hand over your coat, give your shirt as well." Is this civil disobedience (a la Gandhi) as some have suggested, or are we supposed to be doormats, or is it something else altogether?

"Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Perfect!? OK, I want you all to go home and be perfect!

I have read and researched the words and ideas in these passages, about what it means in biblical language to "be perfect," and about the background for Jesus' teaching as interpreted by Matthew—the expectation that God's people would be holy, set apart from other nations by cultic purity and by righteous behavior. (The specifics for holiness were set forth early in scripture, in Leviticus—as we read this morning. "Because God is holy, you are to be holy." Jesus is affirming and elucidating this teaching here.)

Even after study, I do not have a nice linear piece of rope to present to you but there are a couple of points I can offer. They have to do with the statement, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is the line which sums up this whole section of teaching.

First of all, "perfect" means whole, complete. It means a whole-hearted following of God's law, God's Way. The Old Testament command—renewed by Jesus—sums it up: You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart and with ALL your strength and with ALL your mind. Not part, but ALL—that is being perfect. We are to be complete, undivided.

Bill, a friend in Massachusetts, gave a little illustration of having a divided mind. He was a teenager and had never been out in a boat. When a friend invited him to go out in a rowboat, he agreed. The friend took his place at the oars, with the boat still right beside the dock. Bill carefully put one foot into the

center of the boat, as he had been instructed, and the friend cast off the line that tied them to the dock. But the rocking of the boat under his foot made him nervous, and Bill hesitated—which way should he go? He wasn't able to choose one or the other, and—you can imagine. The boat sidled away from the dock, his legs spread too widely and SPLASH—into the cold Massachusetts water.

We need to choose somewhere to stand—in the boat or on the dock. Yet our hearts and allegiances are so often divided. You know of that old song “Is you is or is you ain't my baby?” Maybe Jesus says that to us sometimes.

Another example comes just a bit farther on in Matthew. A rich young man comes to Jesus.

“What shall I do to obtain eternal life?” he asks.

“Follow the commandments,” Jesus replies.

“Which ones?”

Jesus names them and the young man says he has followed these all his life.

Jesus says, “Then you only lack one thing: Go, and sell all that you have, and come with me. Then you will be perfect.”

Jesus perceives that the young man, though working hard to be good, still has a divided allegiance. And Jesus is right. The young man goes away sadly.

You can't go forward on your moral and spiritual journey with a divided allegiance, a divided focus. You have to put your weight down somewhere.

Matthew helps us a bit more. We are to be perfect *because God is perfect*. We are to be wholly committed, single-minded, because God is wholly committed; God is single-minded. Matthew says that God sends rain and sun on the righteous and unrighteous just alike. The sun doesn't shine on the flower pots of that family who gives a lot to charity and not shine on the nasty neighbor's next door. God's sun shines for everyone. This sun and rain illustration is inviting us to think more deeply about how God is perfect—whole, undivided.

It's inviting us to think about God choosing again and again with infinite focus, every single second, to continue pouring out being into creation. God creates that rock and that mountain whether they are beautiful or ugly, whether they fail or do their job well. God steadily decides again and again and again to send being and life. God is fully committed, moment by moment, showering life and love and abundance on all creatures great and small. God is whole-hearted and undivided in commitment. God is perfect in love and devotion. We are to be perfect because God is perfect.

We won't become perfect-- whole-hearted and single-minded--in an afternoon. But contemplating our God who is totally and absolutely committed—God who loves creation, loves us, with all of God's heart and strength and mind—this certainly points the way.