

February 19, 2017, 7th Sunday after Epiphany

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Focus: Jesus saves the unrighteous and evildoers, too.

“If you love your enemies, you won’t have any.” Don’t take my word for it. This quotation is all over bumper stickers, and the Internet, and pastor’s sermons—3 places that never lead you astray! And it seems to go with Jesus’s words here: “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Now I don’t think it’s because I’m so loving all the time, but I don’t know that I really have enemies *per se*. I’m reminded of the BBC tv series *Sherlock* when John Watson tells Sherlock Holmes, “in real life, people don’t have archenemies.” When Sherlock responds, “So what do people have in their real lives?” Watson says, “Friends, people they like, people they don’t like.”

Well, when you put it that way, I’m going to go out on a limb and say that we all have people we don’t like. We all have people we can’t seem to get along with. About a year ago, I decided to take the advice of that quote: “if you love your enemies, you won’t have any,” and I prayed for someone I was having trouble getting along with. (Don’t worry: it wasn’t any of you.) Well, I prayed for months and months, and finally I saw the person again. And *voila!* We got into an argument within an hour. Maybe that’s why, when I looked up the author of this quote, it said, “—Anonymous.” No one wanted to take credit for this quote so detached from everyday reality.

Today is part 4 of Jesus’s *Sermon on the Mount*. This week, Jesus sums it all up simply: “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” And his words and advice seem to be just as detached from reality as Mr. or Mrs. Anonymous.

If someone hits you, we’re taught to defend ourselves. Or maybe in some especially pacifist homes, we’re taught to walk away. **Neither of those is good enough for Jesus!** He says to tell your assailant, “Please Sir, may I have some more?” If you’re an especially generous person, it might be said of you, “Oh yeah, he’d give you the shirt off his back!” **But usually that’s not after someone’s already stolen your coat.** We all love to be generous, **but can we really give to everyone who asks?** We would simply not have any money left for our family, our church, or ourselves. And besides—maybe we’re just enabling them to leech off the system! And loving and praying for your enemies? I might be surprised, but I’m guessing if I include a petition for Al-Qaeda and ISIS in a few minutes, the “Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer,**” might not ring out through the sanctuary. But at least we don’t run into them every day. I think the hardest might actually be praying and loving those people who maybe aren’t enemies, but let’s face it: just get under our skin, maybe bully us, maybe mistreat us, people we just don’t want in our lives but for some reason or another have to live with. Jesus today says that we have to love those people, too.

Well, sorry, Jesus, I’m not perfect. Maybe it helps us to know what Jesus means by “perfect.” In Greek, the word Jesus uses doesn’t mean “perfect” in the same way we mean it. It means “whole, finished, complete.” You’re not lacking anything. You don’t miss a spot.

When we understand perfect like that, maybe it's easier. Except that the standard is to "be whole, finished, complete," *like your Father in heaven is "whole, finished, complete."* So don't be perfect, Jesus says. Just be **godlike**.

Well, what does that look like? As Jesus says, the sun shines and the rain falls on both the righteous and the unrighteous, the do-gooders and the evildoers. God doesn't treat everyone fair. God loves everyone the same. God's love doesn't miss a spot.

To be a baptized child of God means that we belong to that Father. And it means that these words of Jesus are serious and they are for us. To be a child of God means that we are called to be like our Father. We are called to love our enemies as our Father loves them. That's not a warm, mushy feeling (let's be honest: we may *never* feel that way about some people), but love through concrete actions. We are called to respond to violence with gentleness and peace, to go the extra mile, to give away our belongings even until it hurts, to pray for those who don't care about us or even who wish us ill, and to love enemies and folks we don't like and can't even stand. That is what it looks like to be a shining city on a hill for those in darkness. When we let our light shine, it illumines not just those who love to bathe in its light, but those who would rather snuff it out. That's what it looks like to live in the world as a baptized child of God.

To be a baptized child of God means that we are going to meet with resistance. Jesus never said, "if you love your enemies, then you won't have any." He said simply that we are to love them. He said simply we are to pray for those who persecute us. And he also said "blessed are you when people persecute you and revile you for righteousness' sake."

Blessed are you because when you love your enemies, you are standing with Christ. You are standing with Christ who went to the cross. And even while he was being violently mocked, tortured, and put to death, he never stopped loving. He never stopped praying for his tormenters: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

If Jesus was expecting that by loving his enemies and praying for those who persecuted him, they'd either go away, or change their minds, bring him down from the cross, and stitch up his wounds, he was sorely disappointed. But I don't think that's what it was. I don't think Jesus is detached from our reality at all. I think the reason that it's so hard to hear Jesus's words is that we are detached from his reality by sin.

But at the cross, God's reality and our reality meet. Jesus understands what it's like to have real-life enemies. He understands what it's like to have people reject him, to persecute him, to slander him, and yes, even to put him to death. And judging by some of his words when he called the Pharisees, "you brood of vipers!" I think we can say that Jesus even has some people he really doesn't like all too much. Maybe we can relate to him more than we think. But Jesus loves them. Every single one of them. Whole, complete, his love doesn't miss a spot. And there's no person on this earth so unlikable that he didn't die for him or her.

Maybe you've heard the Gospel texts the past few weeks, and maybe you've thought, I really can't do this. Maybe you've been paying attention to Jesus's words, and you've said, "you know I'm really not a peacemaker, I'm really not persecuted for righteousness' sake, I'm really more

of a go-getter than the meek type; I have trouble praying for my enemies—but you know what I am? Maybe I'm divorced, or maybe I have a quick temper, or maybe I have enough trouble making my own ends meet without worrying about everyone else, and maybe I hold a grudge when I go to work or even come to the altar.”

I'm with you. Following the *Sermon on the Mount* the last few weeks has been a reality check. A reality check before Ash Wednesday. It's a time to remember our baptismal call to be that shining city on a hill that when others see our works, they glorify their Father in heaven. And when take that reality check, it also becomes a time to realize we're not there yet. A time to realize that our sinful reality doesn't align with the more perfect reality God is calling us into.

But it's also a time to realize we are children of the heavenly Father. No matter what we've done or failed to do, God loves us not because we're good or righteous or A+ disciples or even always all that likable, but because we are his children by the waters of baptism.

And by the cross of his Son. Jesus Christ died for you and me not because he was so unrealistic as to suddenly think we'll love him perfectly and follow his instructions to the tee. But because he loves us, not just by feelings, but by his life-giving actions.

Through our promises in baptism, we are called to carry his love into a real world with real enemies and real problems and people we may not really like. But Jesus has been there before. And he is with us now.

At the foot of the cross, those who feel righteous and lovable and those who feel unrighteous and unlikable all bow our heads in unworthiness. Because on the cross, Jesus did all those things that we can't do. His reality has become ours. And on the cross, Jesus's love overcame the final enemy that we have to face: death.

His victory over death is whole, complete, and finished. For us and for all people. The sacrifice of his love doesn't miss a spot. And for the righteous and the unrighteous alike, the Son rises and welcomes us all into our Father's perfect love. **Amen.**