

Maud was asked how she lost her husband. She told her sad story: “Well, Norman needed a blood transfusion, but his blood type was not on his record. So the doctors asked me if I knew what it was -- as they urgently needed to know in order to save my Norman’s life. Tragically, I’ve never known his blood type. But I’ll never forget how supportive my Norman was. Even as he was fading away, he kept repeating, “Be positive. Be positive.” That was my Norman. Always thinking of others.

OK, first some background. This business of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It sounds harsh to us, but it was a major step forward in controlling violence in conflictual situations. Previously, the law of *Lamech* prevailed, quoted in Genesis 4:23: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.” There was no equality in inflicted damage. A simple slap could bring down upon itself the full revenge of murder. The whole family could be killed, and the house burned down. Under the ‘eye for an eye,’ called the *LEX TALIONIS*, retribution was carefully measured. If an eye was lost, NO MORE than an eye could be taken as justice, and so on.

But Jesus knew that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would eventually lead to a world full of toothless blind men! So He once again, takes things further, deeper. But with a special twist. (Call for a server) “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...” The RIGHT cheek is specific. For someone to hit a person on the right cheek, they would have to hit you with their left hand, or with the back of their right hand. Jews used the left hand ONLY for their toilet tasks. Therefore, they would have to hit you with the back of the right hand. A backhanded slap would hit an inferior: offering your left cheek, then, would mean that the person had to slap you with the front of their right hand; that is, as he would hit a social equal.

If anyone takes your tunic, hand them your cloak as well. The cloak was your outside garment, your tunic was your underwear. It was believed that if you looked on someone in their nakedness, YOU were cursed. So here you have the image of someone who has taken your underwear, and you pull off your cloak – and now you are naked as a jaybird. It was the Jewish equivalent of flipping the bird! I’m not demonstrating this part of the sermon! Oh, and as an interesting historical footnote. The ancient Romans DID flip the bird! The middle finger was called the *DIGITUS IMPUDICUS*. The shameless one. Isn’t that strange that that custom – with that particular finger – has lasted over 2000 years! You get that free of charge!

And lastly, a Roman soldier had the RIGHT to force you, as a citizen of an occupied land, to carry their heavy pack one mile, but the law PREVENTED them from forcing you to carry it for two miles, and the soldier could be punished by his superior for taking undue advantage of and inciting the local populace. There were mile markers along the highways, so you knew exactly how far one mile was. So you have the rather humorous situation of seeing someone forced to carry the pack one mile, and then not giving it back, and the soldier BEGGING them to give it back lest the soldier get into trouble. All three of these examples are not doormat theology, Christianity for wimps. It’s creative, non-violent resistance. It is demanding that you be recognized for the dignity that you have as a human being, even if part of a people who are oppressed. (from *CELEBRATION*, Feb 2014, p. 4-5). Jesus knew that the people were oppressed. He knew that they did not have the power to overthrow Rome. But He was insisting that they could retain their dignity and encourage one another in maintaining it.

Second, another difficulty with the text that needs some explanation. “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We need to understand that Jesus is speaking about a very special kind of perfection – being perfect in love. It’s clear in the original Greek. The word for ‘perfect’ in this verse is

‘teleios.’ It doesn’t mean ‘sinless perfection,’ which we know is impossible for us as human beings. There IS a Greek word for ‘sinless perfection,’ which is used in the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery. When Jesus straightens up and says to the crowd of would-be stoners, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” He uses that word, ‘anamaretos,’ perfectly without sin. Jesus isn’t speaking about sinless perfection when He told us to be perfect. The word ‘teleios’ that He uses means ‘complete.’

The perfection that Jesus asks us to pursue is perfection in love. The world, as well as our own sinful natures, tells us to love our family and to love our friends. They do not tell us to love our enemies. A complete love, a Christ-like love, includes everyone.

It’s natural – and generally – rather easy to love our family and friends. Even the godfather of Mafia families loves his family and friends. Anybody can do that. Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” Then He says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus is calling us to love as God loves – which includes everyone.

Let’s put it so that no one can miss it: If we love only those who love us, those who look like us, those who speak the same language we speak, and value the same things we value, and vote the same way we vote – and ignore everyone else, or even despise everyone else – we may be a sort-of-nice person, we may be in some ways even a sort of good person, we may be a sort of responsible person, but we are not a follower of Jesus Christ. If we are going to follow Jesus, we are going to need to be complete in our love. We’re going to seek a love that extends to everyone in the world.

Third, how do we bring this home. What’s the point for us today? Linda Petracelli, a United Church of Christ minister, tells the story about growing up in a strict Catholic school. One day, Sister Mary Roberts Cecilia told the children at school that everyone who was not Catholic -- especially Lutherans and Episcopalians – were going to hell.

That afternoon, when Linda returned home, her mother asked her a usual question, ‘What are you thankful for today, dear?’ Linda answered, “Today I am thankful that Sister Mary Roberts Cecilia is not God.” (Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 1997, p. 46). It is an age-old problem for the church – the temptation to forget how amazing and undeserved was the grace which birthed each of us into our Catholic faith. It’s easy to think of that gift as an entitlement, and therefore to become stingy or resistant when it is extended to others who come after us.

It’s true in other parts of our lives as well. Look at all the fuss about granting legal status to immigrants in our country. Unless we are Native American, we all got here the same way – because they ran out of potatoes in Ireland or jobs somewhere else. And what does WOP stand for – WITHOUT PAPERS! Most of our ancestors were illegal immigrants.

We see this tendency surface in a number of ways. For example, in bumper-to-bumper city traffic, when lanes on the freeway are forced to merge, have you ever watched in disbelief as a car is granted access to the open lane by a gracious driver who slows to allow space in front, only to watch that same vehicle so recently grafted into the traffic lane -- refuse access to another car seeking the same mercy from him by aggressively hugging the bumper of the car in front of it? How quickly we forget mercy extended to us when it comes our time to pass it along to another!

It is so easy to think of ourselves and our opinions as right, and everyone who does not agree with me, as wrong. Well, what are we actually FOR? An awful lot of activists on the left and reactionaries on the right have no positive vision, nothing they believe IN, no one they are in love WITH. They are just overwhelmed with what's wrong, and think that by eliminating the so-called 'contaminating element' the world will be pure and right again. They pursue a false understanding of perfection.

That is the major illusion of people on both left and right. In different ways they are both into a politics of expulsion. It's just the object of the expulsion is different. One day the mainline Christian movement will itself recognize that Jesus was never into expelling or excluding anyone – only transforming and integrating EVERYONE. In fact, we might say, that for Jesus the very act of expulsion is the problem. He is always sending the lepers and those healed back into the city, back to the priests, out of the cemetery of chains.

In that light, it is rather amazing that institutional Catholicism ever created the very concept of excommunication. Only the individual can do that to himself, and we had best not make it our corporate concern. It is interesting to me that Hinduism, the oldest religion on the planet, has never excommunicated anyone.

Fred Craddock said "What marks you as a Christian is not who you will feed but who you will eat with." The essence of love is not merely providing goods and services to those in need. Rather the heart of love is a willingness to enter into a deep and caring relationship with them as well." (Source: LECTIONAID, Dec 2006-Feb 2007) It is not merely trying to eliminate sin and imperfection in me. And it's definitely NOT trying to eliminate it in everyone else!

A story to conclude, which I think is a good example of the gospel's idea of 'perfect love.' Dr. Anthony Campolo, in his video series CARPE DIEM (SEIZE THE DAY), tells of a pastor friend of his who lives in Manhattan. Every morning, this pastor would have breakfast at a little diner downtown. And every morning, he would see the same crowd who also started their day at that diner. One day, the pastor walked into the diner and introduced himself to the crowd, then asked everyone there to also introduce themselves to each other. He was just hoping for a more friendly atmosphere in the place. It worked.

It worked for everyone but the owner. All he would reveal of himself was his name, Harry. A few weeks passed, all the regular customers had become friends, and Tony's pastor friend pressured Harry to reveal a little more about himself. So Harry reluctantly announced that his real name was Hazim, and he was from Baghdad, Iraq. Now this was during the time when Saddam Hussein was a real threat to Israeli security, and he had missiles trained on places like Tel Aviv. A majority of the regular customers were Jewish, and tensions between Arabs and Jews were running high. All the customers in the diner froze when Harry announced his national origin.

The next morning, as the pastor was getting ready, he heard a radio report that the US had begun bombing Baghdad. The pastor dropped what he was doing and ran to the subway, hoping to reach the diner before Harry opened that morning. He wanted to reassure the man of his friendship and love. As the pastor rounded the corner, he saw the whole regular morning crowd also lining the sidewalk, waiting for Harry. When Harry arrived, all the customers surrounded him with hugs and words of encouragement. And then the pastor prayed over all of them, and for peace.

After the prayer, Harry said gruffly, "You know, you still have to pay for the doughnuts. But from now on, the coffee will always be free." (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-Mar 1999, p. 20)

"Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect." Love like God loves. Love everyone. Amen.

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