Springfield Presbyterian Church

February 19th, 2023

Impossible Love

1. Introduction

As I was reading some commentary work about our New

Testament passage, I found a story that best reflected my feelings. A pastor wrote, “as I was stumbling into the kitchen after a long day of work, I put down my groceries and pressed the voice mail button. It was my (then) ten-year-old daughter Erin, who said, “Dad, I’m the lector at church Sunday, and I have that passage where Jesus says, ‘Turn the other cheek.’ You know that passage, right? Do the other Gospels have that same passage? Is it different in the other Gospels? Could you let me know, because…no offense, Dad, but I think Jesus is wrong.”

I had to laugh, not at Erin, but at the fact that at the age of thirty-six I’m still scouring to find a way out of this passage. I looked at the other lectionary options, I was seeking a way out, but the Spirit kept on nudging me, like she does, saying, “Becca, there’s a reason this passage is driving you nuts. I’m calling you to dig deeper.”

So I started to dig in, trying to find a few different ways to kind of dull these commands that Jesus is offering on the Sermon on the Mount. Maybe I can make it sound less radical, or perhaps find a Greek loophole, or any list of excuses to not bring these words into our lives in such a powerful and hard way. None of the excuses led me very far and as cute as I may think I am, I know I cannot out logic Jesus Christ. So I took a break and sat down again, with a bigger cup of tea, saying, “Well, if this is what it is, what do we do with these words?”

And the Spirit leaned in with a reality that was hard to grasp – these words are commanded to us as disciples, they are supposed to be this radical, this impossible, and difficult to achieve. Jesus never promised that a life of faith would be easy, in fact, he promised that it would be difficult here on Earth. I can’t make this passage easier to digest.

What I can offer is not an excuse, but another mindset. You see, when I read these words, I think, “Jesus is not calling us to be slapped and hit and broken down. That’s the antithesis of God’s love for us. Why does he use these words and take this stance?

The stance is rooted in a profound resistance, an unexpected refusal to play the opponent or enemy's game. For instance, when I pray for folks I don’t really like, I might grit my teeth a little bit, but I also am doing something counter-cultural and something those folks wouldn’t expect. I’m praying the best for them, I’m still choosing to see them as beloved by God, and I’m deciding to err on the side of love rather than hatred. This isn’t because I’m noble – because trust me – I’d rather have Jesus give me an easier guide to discipleship – but I do it because that is the call. I can’t get around it. As Jesus says, if I just did the same as my enemy, then I’m just like them – I haven’t been changed by Christ and I haven’t changed my human behavior.

One of the harder lines is when Jesus says, “If anyone strikes you right on the cheek, turn your other cheek.” This is a dangerous line for those who are seeking to abuse their power. You may think Jesus is supporting martyrdom, but there’s something else at hand. Maybe your parents said these words to you when you were a kid, “Take the higher road.” Whatever you think of Michelle Obama, her words, “When they go low, we go high” offers the same kind of idea – you aren’t going to sink to that level of hatred

When you turn your cheek, when you go the extra mile, when you give someone the coat off your back – you are not permitting pain, you are resisting evil. True and authentic resistance to evil entails active, creative nonresistance to the evildoer. Your decision to not take part in a vengeful act is an act of noncooperation with harm and it also has the possibility of not allowing or enabling perpetrators to wreak havoc.

Mohandas Ghandi thought so highly of this passage that he wrote that it influenced his nonviolent strategy against the British colonial occupation in India. We can see this nonviolent mindset also play out in the work and life of Martin Luther King Jr. These leaders were not looking to incur harm to themselves – they creatively saw a route that enabled peace without the mentality of an ”eye for an eye.”

1. Be Perfect

What also struck me in our New Testament passage, alongside

these commands, were Jesus’ last lines of the reading, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” As a perfectionist, I felt a bit itchy – I know I can never be perfect, none of us can, that is a key attribute of living this human life. Jesus has just set before us this impossible love – this sheer impossible reality that none of us will be able to accomplish. At first, it can feel a bit defeating.

Yet, Jesus is calling us to this perfect love. Again, I can’t get around that fact. What is perfect love? It is the love we see witnessed within the acts of Jesus in our Gospel stories. That is what love looks like. We have an example and as disciples, our aim is to try and emulate that love as much as we can. Will it ever be perfect? No. The reality is the fact that you can’t give up though – you cannot say that since it is impossible, you will not try. Living out our faith on a daily basis is a radical act that continues to push us towards impractical and impossible love in all we do and say.

1. The struggle is real

Friends, I must admit to you that even though I can unpack this

passage in an artful and theological way, please know that I do not think it is easy. I, and this will shock you, am a little stubborn. Stubbornness is a mixed blessing – it makes me impassioned about things that are important, but I can also put myself between a rock and a hard place where my passion for right or wrong keeps me in a place where I feel stuck. These words are calling me to the hard work of saying, “Okay, your anger might be righteous, sure, you can be stubborn about that, but look for creative responses rather than responses that just make a situation or a person worse off than before.” We learn this as children, but I think we continue to relearn this message again and again in our lifetime. Some folks take to Jesus’ words here lightly, some stubbornly, but the words and meaning do not change from age to age.

The challenge this week is to read this passage several times and write down an answer to these three questions. First, what words or phrases do you struggle with? Second, are there words that you find helpful to hear? Third, when are times that you have had to live out these words in your life? Remember how that felt and wonder if you’d do things the same or anything differently. What does the sermon on the mount in real life look like?

May these words of the Sermon the Mount that were challenging to the disciples of the day, still challenge us today. May they move us closer to emulating God’s love as we see in Jesus Christ and are moved to live into by the Holy Spirit. May we have compassion and grace for ourselves and for others as we seek to live a perfect love even when we are told it is impossible. May these words, from our Savior’s mouth, be a blessing, this day and always. Amen.