

The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

St. Paul's Cathedral, London, ON

February 20, 2011

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Have you ever asked yourself: 'What was Jesus thinking with this 'turn the other cheek' approach. Are we supposed to be doormats for the sake of our faith? Is Jesus recommending that our calling card be 'Mistreat me. I won't retaliate'?

A quick, simplistic reading of Jesus' words might seem to indicate the "doormat approach" and yet, we see Jesus not as a wimpy, retiring, shadow of the Almighty, but as God with Us – the very image of the Living God. We see Jesus as the defender of the poor, the downtrodden, the maligned and mistreated. We see Jesus as Saviour and Lord. None of these attributes equate to "doormat". So how are we to interpret these words of our Saviour?

Another relevant question might be, do we take Jesus seriously or is there some nifty interpretation that helps to explain away Jesus' words or at least provide some general guidance in terms of when to turn the other cheek and love our enemies? The words that Jesus utters are not easy ones to follow, regardless of how conflict-averse we might be. We are created with a "fight or flight response," nestled comfortably in that primitive area of our brains that is not always adequately governed by reason.

Those primitive responses are pre-programmed to help ensure the survival of the individual, and thereby the species. We fight or flee, because our point and purpose is to "live to fight another day," to preserve our well-being. But our job as followers of Christ is not to fight or to flee – in order to follow the example of our Lord and to show the Power of God's Love to overcome all things.

And while it is often easier and more pleasant to stay close to those whom we already know and for whom we already care, Jesus addresses that as well. As difficult as it might be to remain in relationship with those whom we already know and love, Jesus essentially says that we don't get credit for working at those relationship; it's the one with the strangers, the relations with those whom we do not know or maybe don't like – or who don't like us – that count.

It may seem unfair when you think of those people you do not like, or those that you might feel are undeserving, who nevertheless prosper and sometimes receive accolades. But as today's gospel reminds us "God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." In the legal system all deserve a fair trial. In God's eyes all alike deserve opportunities.

None of this makes any sense whatsoever without the gift of God's love. There is a prayer that states:

"O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you."

It is only by this most amazing gift, delivered by the Holy Spirit, that we can hope to overcome our pre-programmed response to fight or flee and bear witness to the God that we serve.

But isn't it possible to horribly twist this sort of logic? Isn't it conceivable that we put ourselves directly in harm's way and risk embarrassment, impoverishment, injury, or death? Isn't it quite possible that we could become the doormats of the world, be considered weak and ineffective in our proclamation of the gospel? Yes, of course all those things are possible, even quite probable; but that is exactly the risk our God took in sending Jesus for us. That is exactly what Jesus did when he allowed himself to be beaten, accused, and crucified. We have the gift of access to relationship with God who desires that relationship so much that even the only child of the Almighty is not withheld. We are given the opportunity to bask in the glow of a love so powerful, that even death cannot contain it.

Taking the Christian road is not easy. As G.K. Chesterton once remarked, "It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but found hard and not tried." This is not an easy Gospel today, my friends. It is also not an excuse to do nothing, for Jesus is speaking about our actions on behalf of ourselves, in our own self-interest. Our agency, our defense, our protection is not for ourselves, but for the sake of others. If we are to follow our Lord's path, we are to use our personal power, influence, reputation, gifts, and wealth on behalf of those who have no power, influence, wealth or reputation. Being "perfect" is treating the "evil and the good" and "the righteous and the unrighteous" as God treats them, providing them with the same opportunity to live as everyone else. Again, our witness is not true and authentic if we portray to the world actions that preserve only ourselves. Our witness is to be given in actions that show our desire to see that all know the benefits of the love of God.

This is difficult, because it forces us to move ourselves out of the centre of the relationship; our centre is focused on another. We are asked to submit – not told, coerced or commanded – to the love of God so that love can show us the way. That love is the way that we are ultimately made safe. We are only ever truly safe in the love of God.

Many questions might be forming and noisily calling for attention and answers, but the specific questions and situations have already been answered in the life and witness of Jesus Christ. We speak the truth that God loves all people, that God makes the necessities of life available to all – both evil and good, righteous and unrighteous – that retribution is not the way to show the justice of God.

When we are out there alone as Jesus was, in a community governed by power that seeks to preserve its own hold on others, we are subject to the persecution, betrayal, and death that Jesus endured. But we, as Christ's followers, can be working to create communities where we will not be out there alone. We have the benefit of the gospel and the knowledge of God's overwhelming grace and love that is able to sustain us and protect us, and even overcome the power of death. "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind", said Gandhi. We have the chance to work to nurture children and young adults that understand that their well-being is only secure in the securing of the well-being of others, all others. We are the people to whom God is looking to make the effort to see that all are treated even as God treats all.

So, are we to be doormats? Are we to meekly submit to the persecution of this world and our enemies? To borrow a phrase from the Apostle Paul, "By no means!"

What we are to be is those people who do not seek to simply protect what they have or what is their own, but who seek to protect others. This profound lack of self-interest and self-protection is rooted in the desire of a community of believers to protect one another, to make sure that all people in all communities, both enemies and friends, have access to the means of life and know the benefit of God's awesome and amazing love.