

Sermon on Matthew 5:38-48

Rev. Anne Van Kley

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A couple of weeks ago, I woke up to a very unexpected snow day. My kids were thrilled, of course. But I have to admit, my first reaction was less positive. I had meetings scheduled. I had a to-do list waiting on my desk. I had things that *had* to be taken care of. My anxiety shot through the roof as I tried to figure out how I was going to juggle all of this! But finally it dawned on me – there was nothing I could do. And as soon as I gave up that control and settled into the idea of the snow day, I realized what a great gift it could be. I was forced to slow down – and hunker down with my little family. And we ended up having this wonderful, unexpected time together.

We've had extra, unexpected time with Jesus this year, too. Last year at this time, we were already in the season of Lent. Normally, Epiphany is just little blip of a season after Christmas, but this year, we've been invited to hunker down with Jesus. To slow down and hear from Jesus, the preacher, for more weeks than usual.

And you know what? We couldn't have planned it better if we'd tried. It turns out this was the perfect time for Jesus to preach to us. Into our strange, busy, anxious world, Jesus has been sitting down and preaching to us about how we, his disciples, are to exist. He's told us how we are to treat our neighbors; how to be a light to the nation; how to welcome those who are different from us; how to stand up for the oppressed; how to be a community of Jesus people.

Before heading toward Jerusalem – toward the cross – Jesus preached what he knew his disciples – and all of us – would need for our life of faith, and all the troubles that would come with it.

During this “snow day” with Jesus, we've had more time with the Sermon on the Mount than usual – in fact we've been hearing pieces of the Sermon on the Mount for a whole month -- four weeks now.

And I've noticed something. Something a professor of mine once called the “big but” of the Gospel. That's right.

Six times Jesus says, “You have heard it said...but...I say to you...”

Six times! Jesus says to us, “The world you live in normally operates this way...but...I say to you...something entirely different.”

This is no accident. In fact, I believe that noticing the big but of the Gospel might actually be the key to understanding the radical, counter-cultural message of Jesus. The key to God's work in the world!

You see, from the beginning, God has shown us over and over again that God's way is always the opposite of what we might expect. God's kingdom is not like our human kingdoms. God's justice is not like our systems of justice. God's power is not the kind of power that people usually seek!

In Jesus, God entered this world in flesh and blood to teach of this lesson again -- to turn all our assumptions about God upside-down! He would be a king born in poverty. He would be a rabbi who broke the laws. He would be a host who would welcome outcasts and sinners. He would be a man who spoke to women; a healer who touched the unclean; a master who would wash his people's feet, a savior who would give his own life. None of this...none of this...follows our rational rules. None of this makes sense to people who live in a society of haves and have-nots; clean and unclean; crime and punishment.

But it's good news that God's way is not our way. Because sometimes our lives are so hard that it's difficult for us to see a way through. And frankly, our ways often just get us into more trouble. So today, I invite you to imagine Jesus speaking these words to you, into whatever situation you are in. "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." Really, try this.

For example, "You have heard it said, 'You are too small to make any difference in this messed up world.' But I say to you, 'I will cast the powerful down, and make the weak ones do mighty things.'"

Or, "You have heard it said, 'You've hit rock bottom.' But I say to you, 'Nothing can separate you from the love of God.'"

Or, "You have heard it said (maybe while looking in the mirror), 'You're not good enough. You are not strong enough. You are not smart enough,' but I say to you, 'Yes you are. You are enough. I have made you in my own image.'"

See, the radical good news of Jesus is that whenever we think there's a dead end, God makes a way. Whenever we think there is death, it turns out that new life is right around the corner.

God promises resurrection. Promises that new, green growth is always possible.

In this sermon Jesus tells us that God gives growth *everywhere, to everyone*. God makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the righteous *and* the unrighteous. And at first, that's sort of inconvenient news.

I don't want the sun to shine on my enemy! I want God on MY side! I want to know that my righteous, just, correct way is also the way that God will bless and nurture!

But the news that God makes the sun shine and the rain fall on both the righteous and unrighteous is *profoundly* good news. Because let's be honest – we are both. Sometimes we are the righteous, and sometime we are the unrighteous. Sometimes we do good, and sometimes we do evil. And so, God help us, we need that radical mercy and grace and forgiveness, when *we* are the enemy. When *we* are the perpetrator. When *we* are the sinner.

And maybe when we realize that God has mercy even on us, even on our worst days, then maybe we'll have a little more humility. And maybe we'll begin to grasp just how wide God's love really is. And then maybe we'll have a little more mercy for those who we think are in the wrong.

Loving our enemies? Praying for those who hurt us? That's not easy. But we can do this, because Jesus has made his home in each one of us.

We don't need to be afraid when Jesus tells us to love our enemies. When Jesus tells us to be perfect. These aren't conditions or check-boxes for salvation. Jesus isn't saying, "Do these impossible things and *then* I'll love you." "Do these things and then I'll save you." No, once again, in true Jesus fashion, it's actually just the opposite.

Jesus says to us -- I love you. So you can love others.
I forgive you. So you can forgive – you can forgive others, and you can forgive yourself.

It might feel impossible, but remember how Jesus started this sermon. Remember the building block on which all these other commands and instructions come. Jesus started by telling us that we are blessed.

We are blessed when we try and we are blessed when we fail. We are blessed when seek peace and when we fight. We are blessed when we are so hungry and thirsty for justice that we can hardly stand up anymore. We are blessed when we mourn. We are blessed when we feel weak. We are blessed – not because of anything we have done, but because of who God is. We are blessed – so that we can be a blessing to others.

This is the unexpected, inconvenient, merciful good news of Jesus. And it is for each one of us, like it or not. It is for the ones you despise. It is even for you. It is for all of us. Righteous and unrighteous. Sinner and saint. Broken and blessed and beloved.

Amen.