

## EPIPHANY 7, Feb. 19, 2017, Year A

"Be perfect, therefore, as our heavenly Father is perfect." (from Matthew 5:38-48)

- *Is it ever appropriate* for a Christian to *engage in*, or even *be associated with*, an act of violence? Hearing Jesus' words in our Gospel today, the question seems to have a simple answer ~ *No!* Jesus refuses to accept the kind of Old Testament justice in which harm *could* be returned for harms suffered ~ like "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."<sup>1</sup> Instead, he plainly says, "*Do not resist an evildoer,*" and, "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek," make your left cheek available, as well. His urging that his listeners 'go a *second* mile' surely references the Roman custom that soldiers could command people to carry their gear for a mile. It seems that some Israelites believed they could focus their love *on neighbors*, while also hating their *enemies*. But Jesus challenges everyone to *love* their enemies, and even to pray for those who persecute them.<sup>2</sup>
- Those who have adopted the posture of *pacifism*, according to which an act of violence can *never* be justified, find strong support in Jesus' words. Not only does he advocate *non-violence*; Jesus *calls for*, and then in his Passion *personally enacts*, the posture of *non-resistance*. This understanding of Jesus' teaching and exemplary life is complicated by the episodes in his ministry when a Roman centurion approaches him *in supplication*. In both Matthew and Luke, a centurion requests a healing for his slave, while referencing the military authority under which he lives. Jesus commends him for his faith, *without challenging him to leave his occupation*.<sup>3</sup> The pattern is repeated in Acts 10, when Peter visits the centurion, Cornelius.<sup>4</sup> In a context that focuses on faith and spiritual growth, Peter overlooks the centurion's membership in the Roman army, whose practices are often barbaric. And, rather than criticize or resist this same power, Paul *depends on* the might of Roman soldiers to protect him when he leaves Jerusalem and journeys toward imprisonment in Rome.<sup>5</sup>
- The point here is *not* that we find an apparent *contradiction* between these texts. Rather, it's that the questions we are raising, and our responses to them, are more complicated and *nuanced* than we *at first* imagine. Let me note two historical observations that fill out this picture. *First*, from the time of Jesus up

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to the Emperor Constantine's 4th century conversion, Christians almost always followed Jesus' example, by *submitting* to violence and persecution, *rather than in resisting* it. *The greatest risk they faced was to be dragged before magistrates*, and compelled to renounce their faith on pain of death. *Then*, with Constantine's conversion, *everything changed!* For *now*, *Christians were the magistrates (!)*, who bore *responsibility* for maintaining the peace and civil order.

- *Second*, St. Augustine, who was born shortly after Constantine's conversion, offered an important distinction, which has shaped Christian thought ever since. Augustine believed that Jesus' Gospel words and meaning are very clear. As a result, *a Christian contemplating self-defense could not justify meeting violence with violence. However*, if someone near me, whether related to me or not, is attacked, Jesus' teaching *about loving my neighbor must be honored*. I honor it by stepping *between* the attacker and his victim, *out of love for the victim*. *But, out of love for the attacker (!)*, it might also mean *resisting the attacker's violence, by forcibly restraining* him.
- Now, of course, *principled pacifists are not persuaded* by Augustine's reasoning. It's hard to imagine but, *prayerfully and tearfully, they try not to resist such violence, even if it comes against a parent, sibling or spouse*. Yet, however faithful *this non-resistance* might be to Jesus' teaching and example, *other Christians have found it to be emotionally and rationally untenable*. I wish we had time to trace how Augustine's ideas were later developed by St. Thomas Aquinas and his successors, and continue to influence Christian and non-Christian thought today.
- For the moment, let's notice two further points related to the central question posed by Jesus' words in today's Gospel. The *first* concerns an important distinction that we have mentioned but not yet fully explored. Jesus' words, as well as his personal example, seem best understood *as applying to individuals*, to persons who are confronted by difficult situations and who must make decisions *for themselves*. The posture of non-violence *and non-resistance*,

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practiced by most Christians until the time of Constantine, reflects this. But, second, when Christians became responsible for the peace and civil order, and defense of the state, decisions about resistance to, or involvement in, acts of violence became much more complicated than when simply considering personal self-defense. Protecting others and, indeed, protecting a community or even a nation presents a wider set of problems. Now, they *not only* had to ask if, in this or that situation, an act of violence *might also* be an act in service of love. They had also to consider whether an act of violence could serve justice.

- If this seems too abstract, then let me pose some further questions. Suppose we decide to honor Jesus' words and example by choosing never to engage in violence, whether in defense of self or of neighbor. Will we then *protest* the fact that the police in our community are *armed*, and that their power to effect civil order rests—in part—on an *implied* threat to use violence? Will we withhold from our taxes the percentage of our obligation that we reckon goes to pay for policing, and the military? But then, what happens if an occupying power begins to haul off Jews, fellow-Christians *or even* secular Muslims, for the purpose of exterminating them? These are not just rhetorical questions, for they go to the heart of what it means to follow Jesus consistently and fully.
- We can ask *a corollary set of questions* of those who do find themselves persuaded by St. Augustine's thinking. *If we think that*, at least in principle, some acts of violence *might also* be acts that could serve love and justice, will we drift into thinking that all such acts of violence can be *so-justified*? Blind or uncritical support for the conduct of police or the military may lead us into this problem. Indeed, large sections of the German Christian community fell into this trap as the Holocaust unfolded.
- You may have noticed that, while inviting you to consider several important questions, *I have not attempted to answer them*. This is intentional, and not a sign of oversight or neglect. I've sketched two basic positions, that an act of violence can never be justified *in the service of* love or justice; *and*, that an act

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of violence *can sometimes* be justified as *servicing* love and justice. Both of these basic positions have had strong and thoughtful adherents over the centuries. Yet, the adherents of both have shared a *common challenge*. That is, *regardless* of which of these paths of reasoning we choose, we are all bound to respect and live into Jesus' closing words in our Gospel, "*Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect!*"

- Attending to these words helps us see how Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is not *just about ethics*, but about a righteousness that transcends decisions concerning behavior and moral action.<sup>6</sup> When Jesus says, "*be perfect,*" we almost *cannot help but* interpret his words as having to do with moral *purity*, and *faultlessness*. But the Greek word, translated here as '*perfect,*' has a much bigger meaning. Jesus' saying might *more helpfully* be translated as, "*be brought to wholeness; be brought to completeness. Allow God to bring you to the fulfillment and realization of your created potential!*" Whether we make good or poor decisions with respect to violence, we can always rightly choose to allow God to re-shape our lives in this transforming way.

### Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Exodus 21:23.

<sup>2</sup> As the notes in the New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV) indicate, this is “the one antithesis” in Jesus’ words here, which refers to a saying “not first recorded in Torah,” but which is instead found in the Qumran Scrolls (more popularly known as the “Dead Sea Scrolls”). See the *NOAB* notes on Mt. 5:43-48.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 8:5ff, and Luke 7:2ff.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 10:1ff.

<sup>5</sup> Some Christians have also found a complication posed by the words of Paul in Romans 13:1-7, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; 4 for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. 6 For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.” (NRSV)

The same challenge is seen as posed by 1 Peter 2:13-17, where we find these words: “For the Lord’s sake, accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right... Honor everyone... Honor the emperor.” (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup> As I contended in last week’s sermon, for Feb. 11, 2017.