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2/20/2011, Epiphany 7A
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Matthew 5:38-48

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁸You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; (Matthew 5:38-39, NRSV)

I think that we preachers get better the more often we preach on a Biblical text. That is the advantage of seasoning. The second and third time through, or the tenth time through, we might see things that we missed back when we were young preachers.

Alas, I don't think such seasoning is going to help me this time. As far as I can tell, I have never reached Epiphany 7 in Year A before, to say nothing of Epiphany 8. This is a long Epiphany Season. I don't think I have ever preached on this text before.

But, all things considered, it is high time to do so, because this is a famous text. Many people, both preachers, lay people, and unbelievers, have heard this preaching of our Lord about turning the other cheek. We all wonder about it, and I dare say that in our heart, we all know Jesus is right. Yes, ten thousand objections and qualifications might leap to our mind, yet somehow in the end we want to say that Jesus is right in this preaching. This is why we fell in love with the Sermon on the Mount in the first place. We sensed from the beginning that in this sermon Jesus is changing the world and introducing a higher way of life for us.

Earlier in the Fifth Chapter of St. Matthew, Jesus intensified the law against murder by forbidding even anger:

²¹You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment... (Matthew 5:21-22, NRSV)

Now Jesus becomes more personal and concrete. He takes his earlier preaching against anger and illustrates it with cases in which it would be quite natural to be angry, because there is cause, aye, obvious cause. He is talking about the indignity of a hit on the face, the hardship of someone suing you for your coat, the exhaustion and disruption of being compelled to walk a mile with someone, as, for example, Roman soldiers had the right to compel people to carry their gear for a mile. Jesus points to concrete frustrations of life, and asks us to respond not with anger, nor with violence, but with love.

My method in this sermon to be guided by two great preachers on this text: St. John Chrysostom from the early church and dear Martin Luther who stands at the start of our Lutheran tradition. I think that somehow, we should seek the middle way between these two great preachers.

I think you will find that Luther is the voice of calm reason here. He manages to get the strange preaching of Jesus under control, which is important, lest believers fall into despair about whether they can in any true measure be faithful followers of Jesus.

But then I want to end with a return to a simple reading of our text, and to ask the question, Is not such peace and goodwill possible for us? And shouldn't we do it, as much as we can? In this section, I am shepherded along by St. John Chrysostom.

So first, Luther. In this 1521 *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, Martin Luther uses his doctrine of the Two Kingdoms to interpret this morning's passage. The kingdom on the right is the kingdom of faith and love, where Christians follow Jesus in his extraordinary purity of heart, peace, and non-violence. And the kingdom on the left is the secular world of rights and responsibilities. The important thing about Luther's teaching is that he believes that *both* kingdoms belong to God and that Christians should serve the Lord in both.

Luther is concerned for the public responsibilities of citizens and governments. It is an important matter. That is why we regularly pray for our governmental officials. Luther has high regard for secular matters, viewing secular rights and duties as divine matters. For Luther, the world of government, law, and business is also part of God's world and Christians, along with all people, have God-given rights and responsibilities within that world.

So, for example, Luther believed that Christians *ought not* to tolerate someone striking them on the cheek, because Christians should support the rule of law in society. The Christian is not authorized to strike back, but the police sure are, and they ought to do it, as far as Luther is concerned.

Let me give you some quotes from Luther along these lines. First off, he refers to people he is convinced have misinterpreted our text. He says this about them:

They supposed that offering the other cheek to an assailant meant saying to him: "See, take this cheek, too, and hit me again," or throwing your cloak to the man who wants to take your coat. If that were the meaning, we would finally have to surrender everything, house and home, wife and children...

Luther's idea is that in our life *as Christians*, we must always seek peace and always practice love toward our neighbors, even our enemies. However, Christians are simultaneously members of secular society, with duties and rights before the government, which is also part of *God's* rule. And as members of this kingdom, we have the right to ask and to firmly require the government and the courts to protect us:

Must a person suffer all sorts of things from everyone, without defending himself at all? Has he no right to plead a case or to lodge a complaint before a court, or to claim and demand what belongs to him? If all these things were forbidden, a strange situation would develop. It would be necessary to put up with everybody's whim and insolence. Personal safety and private property would be impossible, and finally the social order would collapse.

Luther, then, believed that the Christian *qua Christian* cannot respond to the one who strikes you on the face, but the police can and should. And there is no problem with the Christian seeking redress from the courts as long as his heart is pure. That is, he is not to seek revenge on the one who has harmed him, but is to calmly seek that justice should prevail.

Likewise, with lending. In the sermon, Jesus teaches almsgiving and lending:

Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:42, NRSV)

But Luther points out that Christians are also part of secular society, have the right to engage in legal business practices, and to be thoughtful and discriminate about to whom they give:

So it is here, too. He should be willing to lend and give to everyone who asks him. Yet if he knows that this is a scoundrel, he is not obliged to give it to him. Christ is not telling me to give what I have to any scoundrel that comes along and to deprive my family of it or others who may need it and whom I am obliged to help, and then to suffer want myself and become a burden to others. He is not saying that we should give and lend to everybody, but “to him who begs from us,” that is, to the one who really needs it...Therefore we should not do our lending and giving in such a way that we fling our gifts away into the wind and do not look to see who is getting them. First we should open our eyes to determine who it is—whether he is “begging,” as Christ says here, that is, whether he is in need and is asking properly, or whether he is a fraud or a scamp.

Finally, Luther has something to say about this business of praying for the enemy. Well, that depends on what the enemy is doing, Luther says. If the enemy is opposing the Gospel, Luther for one does not mean to pray for that one:

Consequently I say to my worst enemies: “Where it is only my own person that is involved, there I am very willing to help you and to do everything good for you, in spite of the fact that you are my enemy and

that all you ever do for me is to harm me. But where it is the Word of God that is involved, there you must not expect any friendship or love that I may have for you to persuade me to do something against that, even if you were my nearest and dearest friend. But since you cannot endure the Word, I will speak this prayer and benediction over you: ‘May God dash you to the ground!’

So, that is the some of the teaching of Luther on our text. I am glad for it, lest it seem that Jesus is bidding us on toward madness.

And yet! And yet, I think Jesus *is* bidding us on toward madness, at least madness as this mad world conceives it. Our world has too much wickedness. In this passage, Jesus is teaching us a new way to prevail over it. He is not asking us to acquiesce in evil, but to prevail over it in his particular way. St. John Chrysostom puts the matter this way:

“What then?” it is said, “ought we not to resist the evil one?” Indeed we ought, but not in this way, but as He hath commanded, *by giving one’s self up to suffer wrongfully*; for thus shalt thou prevail over him. For one fire is not quenched by another, but fire by water. (Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 5:38-48)

To do what Chrysostom suggests here, to “give one’s self up to suffer wrongfully,” can sometimes break the dance, break the momentum of violence and anger. Indeed, to turn the other cheek can sometimes stun the opponent and save a soul. And that is what Chrysostom wants, that we will amaze the world with goodness and thereby fetch others to Christ.

Chrysostom has this interesting idea that those who are angry with us and slap us on the cheek are like people who are ill with fever or madness, and that we should emulate our Great Physician of soul and body, seeking to bear with the sufferer and to help make that one well:

For so too the physicians, when they are kicked, and shamefully handled by the insane, then most of all pity them, and take measures for their perfect cure, knowing that the insult comes of the extremity of their disease. Now I bid thee too have the same mind touching them that are plotting against thee, and do thou so treat them that are injuring thee. For it is they above all that are diseased, it is they who are undergoing all the violence....*Trample not then on the fallen*, but rather pity him.

Likewise, Chrysostom compares Christians to nurses and doctors who are patient with a woman in childbirth:

Seest thou not the women that are in travail, how they bite those that stand by, and they are not pained? or rather they are pained, but bear it

bravely, and sympathize with them who are in sorrow and are torn by those pangs. These do thou too emulate...

Chrysostom, then, would have us obey the teaching of Jesus about turning the other cheek because he wants us to be people of mercy on those who are suffering, and he takes the sinful to be, in the end, sufferers. "Trample not then on the fallen."

He wants us to save the sufferers because that is what Jesus does. He forebears, he endures, he endures the spitting and the blows to the face:

⁶⁷Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote *him* with the palms of their hands... (Matthew 26:67, KJV)

He bears the Cross and rises undaunted, with his pity on us unchanged, to sit at the right hand of the Father to be the Great Intercessor a world that continually opposes God.

Altogether, Chrysostom hears the great appeal of Christ that we should emulate God:

⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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...⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:44-48, NRSV)

He hears this great appeal and he seems to say, Why not? Let's be to it!

I bet there is a middle way between the sensible preaching of Luther and the more literal and naïve preaching of Chrysostom. One way or the other, *we* have benefited from the reality that Jesus not only preaches extraordinary patience and forbearance, but practices it too. And if he bids us to follow him in such patience, it feels like a high privilege -- aye, the privilege of the very disciples of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.