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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Sermon on the Mount, July 2, 2023  
Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have an inspiring Bible lesson before us this morning. Jesus wants his Christians to be a peaceful people. I figure that we can never get too much of these golden words and so let me read a portion of our text for you again. This is from St. Matthew Chapter 5. Jesus says this:

<sup>38</sup>You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5:38-40, NRSV)

To begin this sermon, I would like to tell you a little story about Richard John Neuhaus. It is a story that delights me. Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, of blessed memory, was a prominent Catholic leader here in America. He founded the important journal *First Things*, which is still going strong, and he was the kind of Catholic leader who would journey to Rome and who knew Pope John Paul II personally. But old-timers here at Immanuel might well remember that before Richard John Neuhaus became Catholic he was born and raised a Lutheran. Indeed, he was Pastoral Associate here at Immanuel along with Pastor David Lotz. That was before my time, but when Carol and I came along, Fr. Neuhaus included us in periodic gatherings at his home, and he was always kind to us.

So, as I remember the story, it goes this way: Once upon a time, Richard John Neuhaus was walking the sidewalks here in New York City and he chanced upon two men fighting. One man had the other one down on the sidewalk and was pounding him. Neuhaus went up to the fighting men and told them to stop it! “Why should we stop it?” the fighting men demanded. And Neuhaus, answered, “Because I am a priest!” And the fighting men said, “Oh!” and they stopped their fighting.

I mean to return to this story later in this sermon but for now I want you to notice two things about this story: Fr. Neuhaus spoke both as a Christian trying to live according to our Lord’s teaching about love *and* he was speaking as a bearer of an office. He was a priest. He had a right to speak. Even the fighting men seemed to recognize that.

Okay. For a first step in this sermon let us note that New York City would be a better town if everyone lived according to our Lord's teaching about turning the other cheek and about love for the enemy. And do we not long for such a town! In a city with so many people as we have, we are bound to get annoyed from time to time. People crowd and jostle us. Cars with blasting radios make us hear music we do not want to hear. Dogs pee on the flowers and ruin them. Dog leashes constitute trip hazards older folks fear. Pickpockets steal things. Half the city, it seems, gets on the cross-town bus without paying the fare. And sometimes folks get mad and start pounding on each other. It would be nicer if people loved even their enemies. I imagine that that is what the New Jerusalem will be like when it settles down from the clouds and transforms our city into a city of peace. Thy kingdom come. I pray that petition with increasing earnestness as I get older.

My two chief teachers for this sermon are St. John Chrysostom from the early Church and Martin Luther more than a thousand years later. Both of these great teachers cherished our Lord's words about turning the other cheek and loving the enemy.

St. John Chrysostom, for example, did not want us to suppose that the teachings of Jesus are impossible.<sup>1</sup> He believed that when we are smitten, we should remain undisturbed. When we lay down our arms in this way, he argues that such peacefulness is impressive. He says this:

For nothing so restrains the wrong doers, as when the injured bear what is done with gentleness.

He asks us to be grateful for the kind of training our souls are undergoing when we let neither insults nor blows nor the taking of our property gall us. It changes us and improves our character when we will not contend.

And besides the good influence on others of our peacefulness, Chrysostom notes that there is something more thrilling than all: I mean, our becoming like God! It is as Jesus says in our Gospel Lesson. Let me use the King James Version this time:

<sup>44</sup>But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;  
<sup>45</sup>That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.  
(Matthew 5:44-45, KJV)

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<sup>1</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Homily XVIII, on Matthew 5

Jesus would have us shower our goodness and our peace on everyone in sight, including our enemies and those who annoy us.

And if we should ask whether this is *possible* for us humans, Chrysostom points us to Jesus. Jesus was subject to injury and frustration as we are. Yet hear Jesus on the cross: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

St. Peter speaks of the example Christ sets for us:

<sup>22</sup>He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. <sup>23</sup>When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:22-23, RSV)

We are to walk in His steps, the Apostle says.

Likewise with Luther. He cherishes the teaching of Jesus about turning the other cheek and loving the enemy. And so, in Luther's treatise on *The Sermon on the Mount*, we read this about Christians:

They should not desire revenge at all. They should have the attitude that if someone hits them on one cheek, they are ready, if need be, to turn the other cheek to him as well, restraining the vindictiveness not only of their fist but also of their heart, their thoughts, and all their powers as well. In other words, what He wants is a heart that will neither be impatient nor wreak vengeance nor disturb the peace.<sup>2</sup>

But with Luther, we find a new thought. We find him speaking of "office." Think of Richard John Neuhaus stopping the fight by saying that he was a priest. He was mindful of his office. He interrupted the fighting men not simply because he loved peace, but also because he felt an official responsibility to stop the violence if he could.

To uplift this idea of "office," let me refer to an outrageous moment in the life of Jesus. I mean that appalling moment when an officer of the high priest struck Jesus. We read of this in the Passion narrative of St. John. The scene goes this way:

<sup>19</sup>The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. <sup>20</sup>Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly. <sup>21</sup>Why do you ask me? Ask those

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther on Matthew 5:38-48, LW 21

who have heard me, what I said to them; they know what I said.”<sup>22</sup>When he had said this, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?”<sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” (John 18:19-23, RSV)

I bet that the sun and moon, stars and all the angels of heaven flinched at that blow! They grieved to think that their sweet Jesus, through whom all things were made and without whom nothing was made that was made (John 1)... surely they grieved exceedingly to see that officer strike Jesus.

Now, my friends, I think that this is where we are, positioned between the *teaching* of Jesus to turn the other cheek and the *example* of Jesus who did *not* turn the other cheek but rather objected to the blow and questioned the one who had struck it. And so it is that in this fallen world, we have to apply the peaceful teachings of Jesus as best we can, and in any particular case, we might be left uncertain as to whether we have done the right thing. We want to follow Jesus. Certainly we do! We want to walk in his footsteps. But the world is complex and we bear many responsibilities in this world — responsibilities that sometimes urge *against* turning the other cheek and *against* giving away not only our coat, but our cloak as well (Matthew 5:38-42).

So, I want to speak of Martin Luther. I think that he helps us to advance a bit over what seems to be a puzzle in Jesus — the way he teaches us to turn the other cheek but did *not* turn the other cheek to the officer who struck him. I am most eager that you should grasp one point in particular: Luther would have us to understand that Jesus is not being inconsistent. As the saying goes these days, Jesus is not talking the talk, but failing to walk the walk. He is not undoing by his actions what he had earlier taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, Luther would draw our attention to the notion of “office.” It is akin to Richard John Neuhaus stopping the fight by saying that he was a priest. He bore an office in this world.

Likewise we could say of Jesus before the high priest, that both he and the officer of the high priest bore offices in this world, and it was high time for both Jesus and the guard to bear their offices with integrity. Jesus bore the office of a prophet, who must speak the truth, *and* he bore the office of prisoner. Prisoners are not to be the mere subjects of the whims or the cruelty of the guards. To be a prisoner is to enjoy the protection of that status. The prisoner too must be treated with justice. As for the officer of the high priest, he fell short of his office. He neglected his duty. He was to guard Jesus, yes, but he was not to strike him. This happened again and again to Jesus in his passion. People mocked him. They plaited a crown of thorns and placed it

on his head. They struck him and spat upon him and tormented him saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?” (Matthew 26:68) Altogether, they did not bear their office as guards with integrity.

So, Luther would say that when Jesus objected to the abuse, he was not undoing his earlier teaching, but rather standing up for justice when his office asked him to do so.

Luther has a plain way of putting things. For example, in his treatise on *The Sermon the Mount*, Luther raises this question:

What kind of crazy mother would it be who would refuse to defend and save her child from a dog or a wolf and who would say: “A Christian must not defend himself”?

Luther’s point is that the mother must not stand quietly by as her child is destroyed. She must not stand quietly by precisely because she bears the office of mother. It is her god-appointed duty to protect her child. This phrase “god-appointed duty” is crucial to Luther’s argument. Luther believes that we Christians straddle two worlds — the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world. And here is his key idea: The kingdom of the world is also a spiritual kingdom. It is not a world forsaken by God. Rather, it is world in which our God delights in us as we stand up for justice and do our duties.

Let me give you another example of Luther’s plain speaking. It is an example that is relevant to New Yorkers. It is about giving to beggars. Luther writes this about being a Christian:

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...

In this passage, you can see Luther trying to straddle the two worlds — the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world. He starts off speaking of the kingdom of Christ. And so he says about the Christian that he or she “should be willing to lend and give to everyone who asks.” But he cannot bring himself to rest with that, but goes on to argue that in the kingdom of the world, we need not give to anyone who asks. And his point is that God himself does not want us to give to the scoundrel.

Luther believed that if, from time to time, we are innocent of duties and bearers of no office, then we should be the people of peace Jesus preaches about in his Sermon on the Mount. If the only one who would suffer by turning the other side of our face to the one who has struck us is ourselves, then offer that other cheek, give to the one who begs, lend to the one who would borrow from you, and love your enemy.

But in many cases, we occupy offices. We have duties. If we are a Christian policeman, for example, or a judge or an attorney, we must not simply face evil and say, "Go in peace. I will not contend." And many of us occupy the office of father or mother, friend or worker, teacher or boss. We have responsibilities in the secular realm and Luther would have us believe that they are godly responsibilities.

I think St. Paul puts it all together best. In Romans 12:18, he puts things this way:

If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. (Romans 12:18, KJV)

To finish up, let me admit that I have preached on today's text before, but I have never preached well on this text. I've never preached to my own satisfaction. There is something uplifting and inspiring about today's teaching about turning the other cheek, loving the neighbor, and giving to the one who asks. My words fall short. Perhaps the best I can do is to emphasize parts of St. Paul's way of putting things:

If it be *possible, as much as lieth in you*, live peaceably with all men. (Romans 12:18, KJV)

And with all women, with all boys and girls, following the teaching and the example of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.