

Last month I visited a couple I have known since I was ordained. When I first met them, they had three small children under the age of seven. Now, the youngest of their *five* children is a freshman in college. The pictures of their young children that hung on the wall as we became friends have been replaced by pictures of their grandchildren, along with a sign that says, “grandchildren are God’s reward for not murdering your children.”

I think the love of a good parent is a great image for the kind of love Jesus is teaching us in the Sermon on the Mount. A parent may not always *like* their children. My parents didn’t *like* me when I had a tantrum when I was a toddler, or when I was a sullen teenager who preferred *anyone’s* company to theirs. But they always loved me. They always wanted my good, even if I didn’t recognize their love as love.

Willing the good of the other is the kind of love Jesus is preaching in the Sermon on the Mount. My parents were still good to me when I didn’t show them gratitude. To desire the good of another without demanding they reciprocate is to love like God, who *makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust*. God desires the good of the saint and the sinner and the atheist and the terrorist.

Our *natural* tendency is to love those who love us and to avoid those who don’t. But, Jesus says, even pagans love those who love them – because it’s natural. Jesus invites us to love as God loves, which we cannot do without God’s help. My parents’ love for me was greatest when I was behaving my worst, not my best. When I was ungrateful they still gave me food, clothing and education. They still prayed for me.

How often do you pray for your enemy? In our society it is practically a *virtue* to hate people who are violent, who abuse children, who are unjust. In our contentious, polarized country, we delight in vilifying the opposing party or candidate – they are treasonous enemies beyond redemption. Jesus teaches us to pray for our enemies, and even to act in such a way that invites them to change. He quotes from the book of Leviticus which says, “fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” It was meant to limit violence. Punishment could not exceed an injury given. But Jesus does not allow retaliation. If I really desire the good of my enemy, if I love them as God loves them, I should want their conversion. Running away from them won’t help convert them, and fighting with them will just increase their violence and add ours to it.

So Jesus shows us a third way: surprising an enemy; shaking them up. It is risky, but powerful. “When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.” In Jesus’ culture, no one ever used the left hand when interacting with a person, so in order to strike someone on the right cheek, an aggressor would have to use the back of the hand. This was a gesture of contempt, the way one would strike a slave. To offer the other cheek was to invite an aggressor to recognize you as an equal.

If someone took you to court over your tunic, it was because you were too destitute to pay a debt any other way. They were literally suing the shirt off your back. So, Jesus says, give your cloak as well and stand before your creditor naked. He would be shamed, and, perhaps, realize the violence he is doing to you.

The Romans marked roads with mileage signs, and soldiers could legally conscript any person in occupied territory to carry their gear or supplies for one mile, like a personal slave - but only one mile. So, Jesus says, keep carrying the load, and that whole second mile the soldier will be asking *you* for the load. And maybe they will rethink abusing the time and labor of another person.

This strategy may result in someone taking advantage of us. But we know an eye for an eye leads to a never-ending cycle of violence, and running away emboldens the unjust or violent. Jesus says confront the one who wrongs you the way *God* would. Convict their heart with unexpected dignity and goodness. God desires the conversion of the sinner more than anything else, and He wants *us* to want the same. To do this, we must rely on God, and have an intimate relationship with Him. It helps to admit that we are sinners who don't deserve our Father's extravagant care. That makes it easier to imagine He loves our enemy, too.

*That's* precisely where I am in need of conversion the most, and I'm not the only one. How many of us have feuds with neighbors, siblings, co-workers – and over what? What is more important to us than their soul? Money? Property? Our pride? Jesus says we are blessed when we hunger and thirst for righteousness – and that desire is most intense when we want our enemy to become righteous! When the source of our dignity is God's love, rather than our wealth, power, or self-esteem, we can respond to our enemy using the “third way” of Jesus. Not with violence or cowardice, but *holiness, dignity* and a desire for their conversion. That's how my friends responded when their kids behaved badly, and how my parents acted when I was a jerk. And that's how God – our *heavenly* Father - responds to us. And the reward he gives us is not grandchildren.

Instead, he will call us His children – forever.