

## LEARNING THE WAY: “Words to Live By”

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As we continue our preaching series on the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel According to Matthew, many of us are hearing words and phrases that are familiar. Last week Charlie preached on the Beatitudes, that beautiful collection of “Blessed are . . .” with its contrasts that leave us pondering. This morning’s text contains words and phrases that I heard often as a child and, honestly, I didn’t like them very much. What child likes to hear after hitting her brother (he did hit me first, by the way) “Clara Jo, turn the other cheek”? I never liked it when my parents said, “Go the extra mile.” And “love your enemies” well, that was just plain ridiculous. These are words and phrases that were part of my childhood, heard almost as often as, “He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword” which happened to be one of my father’s annoyingly favorite quotes. Some years later, as my father was battling his final illness, we talked together about his funeral service and what he wanted to have in it. He said he wanted the Sermon on the Mount read for the Scripture lesson. The whole thing? *Yes, the whole thing.* It’s pretty long, Dad. *I know. Why? Because these are the words I have tried to live by.* Enough said. As much as I didn’t like to hear it as a child after my brother and I had gotten into some rather typical sibling spats, the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are indeed, words to live by. Listen now for the Word of God:

(Read Matthew 5:38-48)

It is mornings such as this when I find myself racing between pulpit and pew. From the pulpit I can say with great conviction the words of Christ our Lord, “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; . . . go the extra mile, . . . give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you, . . . love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Easy to say from the pulpit. But then I find myself quickly racing back to the pew and I think, *What? Easy to say, preacher, but darned hard to do! Get real!*

The commands of Jesus in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount are hard. We cannot water them down and make them into a nice little greeting card to leave on the end table next to our favorite chair in the living room; they’re not the sort of thing that we’re likely going to turn into a piece of artwork and hang above the mantel over the fireplace. “Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” are words that are difficult to follow, no doubt about it. But like so many things that are difficult, the payoff is pretty amazing. My friends, if we are going to have life, life in Christ, life abundant, then we need to own these words for ourselves. Because these are indeed words to live by, they are words of life.

So how do we do it? After all, most of us would say that it’s far easier to hold a grudge, ignore people in need, and discount people who we assume voted differently than we did. There is no question about it that the words of Jesus in our reading for this morning are far easier to say than they are to do. It’s easier for us to tell someone else to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and love their enemies than it is to do it ourselves. But you know, the thing about Jesus is, he not only told his disciples, his followers, those who were learning from him; the thing about Jesus is, he not only told his disciples – US! – he also did it himself. He loved with God’s love –

everyone: the poor, the downtrodden, the marginalized, those who no one else saw and the ones whom everyone else saw and then chose to ignore. Jesus loved with God's love, and he calls his followers – way back when, and now; the original 12, and you and me – to do the same.

We, you and I, pew and pulpit, are called to love as God loves. How do we do it? I am convinced that we can only love with God's love if we first recognize, accept, and fully claim God's incredible love for us ... for you, and you, and you... for me. Not just in our heads, but in our hearts. Not just on Sunday mornings when we gather together to sing uplifting songs and pass the peace of Christ to each other. In order to love with God's love, we first have to accept, fully and completely, that love for ourselves, with our whole being: heart, mind, soul, spirit. To let God's love so fill us that we're ready to burst. Because it is in the bursting, if you will, that God's love spills out into the world ... to those closest to us in our families, to the neighbors we know and the ones we have yet to meet, to the friends we hang out with and the people in the world who are so desperately looking for a friend. As the writer of I John states, "We love because God first loved us." (4:19)

You know, a very interesting thing happens when we begin to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Suddenly, perhaps even miraculously, the whole structure of friend and enemy is dismantled. Alan Brehm, a Presbyterian pastor from Texas, puts it this way: "Instead of allies and foes, we're simply left with human beings who are all children of God." Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Love those who see the world through lenses different from your own, love those who cheer for the opposing football team, love those who celebrated the Inauguration on Friday and those who marched on Saturday. Love those who look, speak, think, or pray differently than you, and pray for them all. William Brosend puts a challenge before us when he asks, "What is the difference between friend and enemy if you love them both?" Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to love, to love as God loves ... fully, deeply, abidingly, without limitations. It may be easier at first glance to hold a grudge, try to get even, or hit back, but really, what kind of a life is that? Jesus has words to live by. So let's learn the way and get living as children of God ... in love! Amen.