

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, February 19, 2017)

Text: **Matthew 5:38-48** (*The Message*)

“Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: ‘Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

Reflections by Pastor Donald: “Radical Love”

Working through the Sermon on the Mount has been a fascinating and challenging experience for me these last few weeks. It’s been a most meaningful exercise rediscovering these wonderful words and viewing them in a new light as God continues to speak through a host of progressive voices and writers.

At first this seemed to me like the sermon-to-end-all-sermons, but as I’ve had the opportunity to delve deeper into it and look to God for new revelations concerning it, I’ve realized that it’s really the sermon-to-BEGIN-all-sermons. For the through line that courses its way throughout the entire sermon can be summed up in one word – LOVE; Love, the beginning and the end, that which is in all, through all and always will be. God’s love for us, our love for God and the love we are to show to one another reflecting and expressing the love that God has for us and we have for God.

As I mentioned in our explorations last week, it’s very easy to get hung up on what sounds like a bunch of rules Jesus is outlining here on the mount. Reading this sermon from a literal perspective one could be forgiven for thinking none of us could jump as high as the bar that Jesus seems to set for us with this seemingly impossible laundry list of do’s and don’ts, culminating today with that oh-so-easy directive of “just be perfect like God is perfect.”

But here’s the great thing about finding ourselves in a progressive denomination and a seeking church. For just as he did with his listeners on that ancient mount and the disciples that walked with him on his journey, Jesus, I believe, is encouraging US to question, to wonder, to dig deep within ourselves and within God’s word to understand what is being said to each of us as individuals and as a community.

We needn’t run away when we find verses that disturb us. We needn’t hide from God (like we could) when we think the bar has been set too high or feel like we’re being judged for not living up to some impossible standard. We can keep on asking, and receive what we ask for. We can keep on

seeking, knowing that we will find. We can keep on knocking, and be sure that the door will be opened to us.

So let's start knocking...(knock, knock, knock)

Jesus, I think, enters our hearts by speaking first here to what some modern day psychologists like to call our "reptilian brains." The term emerges from the famous, albeit controversial triune brain theory developed by physician and neuroscientist Paul MacLean, wherein he postulates that three distinct brains emerged successively in the course of evolution and now co-inhabit the human skull. McLean sees the reptilian brain as the oldest of the three, and it is believed in this theory to control the body's vital functions such as heart rate, breathing, body temperature and balance. Our reptilian brain includes the main structures found in a reptile's brain: the brainstem and the cerebellum. The reptilian brain is reliable but tends to be somewhat rigid and compulsive. Dr. MacLean proposed that the reptilian complex was responsible for species-typical instinctual behaviors involved in aggression, dominance, territoriality, and ritual displays.

Hmmm... kind of like an eye-for-an-eye or a tooth-for-a-tooth behavior, don't you think? Or, going even further in the Exodus law, a hand for a hand, a foot for foot, a burn for a burn and a stripe for a stripe. You hurt me, I hurt you. Jesus, you see, knows and understands our instincts and calls us to a higher place. A more evolved place. A place where LOVE abounds; where we're not so much concerned with our own protection and security in this temporal body and space, but are willing to not hit back and escalate the violence perpetuated upon us. Stop the cycle, he says, change the outcome, be the peace you want to see manifested in the world around you.

But, wait a minutes, Jesus... (knock, knock, knock). Are you saying we should just be a doormat for you? Let people walk all over us and hit us and keep hitting us? Is that what you want for your children?

The wonderful writer Alyce McKenzie helps us out here in her essay, A Love Like Sunshine, when she writes that throughout the sermon on the mount, "Jesus used what New Testament scholars often call the 'rhetoric of excess.'" In her view, Alyce says, "We are to read this scene not as a universal rule for how to respond when we encounter physical violence or theft. Rather, it is to be applied like a proverb; we are to decide in which situations it is a wise ethical guideline and in which it is not. But it sets forth the ethical value of non-resistance as a valid strategy."

An interesting take. But how does it play out in your own life? How have we seen it play out in the lives of others? Does violence for violence create less violence or more? As Pastor Tom Beam states, "Jesus called his followers to entertain doing the radical!...Though retaliation was surely lawful, Jesus called his followers to move beyond the law. They, and we..., empowered by the Holy Spirit, are privileged to not enforce the legal right. In other words, Jesus wanted those...who would seek to follow him... to exhibit the radical response of love poured out."

There it is again. Did you hear it? Love. A radical, kind of love Jesus calls us to embody. Don't just do what is expected of you. Don't just do what your old reptilian brain tells you to do. If somebody asks you to walk them to their car, consider opening the door and helping them in, too. If somebody needs a Kleenex, don't just give 'em one, give 'em the whole box. What do you think? Too much? Too little? How radical do you wish to be?

Look into your own experience for a moment. Have there been times in your life when somebody helped you out? When somebody went the extra mile for you or did something beyond what you asked of them? If so, how did that make you feel? Loved? What does it feel like to do that for someone else? How would our world change if we thought more about how much we could do for each other instead of how little?

Oh...okay... (knock, knock, knock) – fine, Jesus. But, come on... love our enemies? PRAY for those people who hurt me, mock me and come after me? Tall order.

But you see, “[the] kind of radical, lavish love Jesus is talking about has room for loving (i.e. caring for and about) those who do not love us and those who are different from us,” Sharon Blezzard says in her article, “The Disciples Guide to Lavish Love.” “Not only are we to love those folks, we are to pray for those who are openly hostile to us. Lavish love is not for the faint of heart or the lazy. Lavish love requires commitment, faith, hope, joy, and the willingness to be a bit “foolish” in the eyes of the world.”

I especially like what our dear Rev. Susan Garet once mentioned to me as we studied this text a few years ago, “If you are praying for someone,” she wrote, “it is very hard not to love them.”

Being gay, I’ve had any number of opportunities during my life to pray for my enemies, and there have been quite a few. I don’t find it easy. I find myself wondering why anyone would want to hurt me; why being different than others is a reason to inflict violence. And yet, as I hold these persons in prayer I feel my heart soften, I hear God’s calming voice and I feel God’s peace. For in those moments of prayer I remember the child of God each one of us is, and I begin to see what lies at the heart of the hatred and the bigotry and what a sad and angry place that must be to dwell within.

In our lectionary Hebrew scripture from Leviticus for today, God says, “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” In this passage I see a distinct parallel to what Jesus is speaking about here in his sermon on the mount, “because God is love, you shall be love as well.” Jesus prompts us to be who we really are – beings made in the image of God. God who loves all people regardless of their race, gender, faith or politics, even if they and we might consider each other “enemies” and calls us to love likewise.

“As Jesus teaches, the beginnings of a new order are sown, a new order that does not simply make the weak strong and the strong weak, but one that will transform the nature of community by the example he will set as well as by the words he preaches,” writes UCC Pastor Rev. Mark Suriano in his article, “Going Beyond.” “The strength of this passage lies in the knowledge of how the whole enterprise turns out. Jesus’ inexorable march to Jerusalem would punctuate his teachings with an example so convincing that later generations would know that he was more than a person who spoke well, he was a person who lived what he preached.”

As we conclude this series on the Sermon on the Mount, awash in the radical love of Jesus, I want to leave you today with a beautiful piece I found in a book called, “Gifts in Open Hands,” that I’ve shared from this pulpit before. This particular piece comes to us from Geoffrey Duncan, living in England, and he calls it, “My Creed—My Beatitude”:

I believe in the precious nature
of each individual.

Peace to the people who respect their
challenging and exciting neighbours.

I believe in Justice for all people.
Peace to the people who support the right
for people to be accepted for who they are.

I believe in the acceptance of women and men of whatever sexual orientation and persuasion.
Peace to the people who speak out against persecution, bullying, verbal and physical abuse of
individuals and groups of people.

I believe in an Inclusive Church.
Peace to the people who, with their LOVE and desire for the wholeness of humankind, create
communities and churches where we are enabled to worship in the spirit of
diversity, honesty, and love. Amen.