

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
7th Sunday after The Epiphany
February 19, 2017

Many people today read the Sermon on the Mount, of which our gospel story is a part, as a set of rules for the Christian life. I know I have read it that way in the past. And maybe some of you read the Sermon that way as well. And of course, that reading is not completely wrong. The Sermon does provide directives and practices for the life of the Christian community.

At the deepest level, however, the Sermon is not primarily a set of rules or directives. At the deepest level, the Sermon on the Mount is an act of imagination – and a rather wild and crazy act of imagination at that. In the Sermon, Jesus reimagines the world and invites us, the church, to live into this new, alternative reality.

And the world Jesus imagines is a crazy, upside-down world, sort of like the world of a carnival, in which everything is turned on its head. Those on the bottom are on the top. Those on the top are on the bottom. We stand before mirrors which distort our body shape, making our heads teeny tiny and our bodies enormous or our feet huge. Everything is out of whack. The source of our joy at a carnival is the suspension of all the old, rigid rules and the invitation to see things in a whole new way. This is the power in the Sermon on the Mount – it presents a world that runs counter to any presuppositions, rationalities, and myths of Jesus' day – and our own:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...

“Blessed are those who mourn ...

“Blessed are the meek...”

“Blessed are people who revile you and persecute you ...”

And that's only the beginning of the sermon.

In the Sermon Jesus tries to dislocate and disorient us, to shock us out of our common-sense and complacency, our taken-for-granted presuppositions so that we might see the world differently, and live our lives differently.

We might even think of Jesus as a jester. Yes, I know that's an unusual depiction of Jesus – but think about it for a moment: a jester is one who sees the world in odd or unusual ways, often from the place of an outsider. And through often comic antics, the jester seeks to startle and dislocate people, so they can see things with a new perspective, allowing their imagination to be engaged in something brand new. Jesus does that a lot in the Sermon on the Mount.

Nowhere does Jesus play the jester more clearly than in the words he speaks to us today. “You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. Here Jesus tackles the “law of retaliation.” It's in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. It's important to the culture Jesus lives

in. Interestingly, it was actually a means to limit violence – to check the kind of uncontrolled vengeance that was common in the day. It limited retaliation to retaliation “in kind”: No *more* than an eye for an eye. No *more* than a tooth for a tooth. It was a piece of progressive legislation. But still the deep presupposition remains: the way to respond to the enemy – the way to respond to the one who has harmed you – is through violent retaliation. So, Jesus is not done with this subject of violence against others and, as he plows through the rest of the sermon, will continue to engage us in imagining a different response to violence, other than violent retaliation.

It’s good we have Jesus to give us this perspective, for often it seems impossible for us to imagine alternatives to violence that can reflect our baptismal vows of respecting the dignity of all, seeking Christ in all persons, and promoting justice and peace.

“You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

“But I say to you ...” and here Jesus begins to melt the solidity of the world – “But I say to you, “Do not violently resist the evildoer.”

I believe Jesus’ message to us this morning is “You have to break the cycle. You have to create even a moment of space where the seed of peace can be planted.” I can hear Jesus saying to us, “I no longer want you to respond to anger against you with escalated anger. I no longer want you to respond with abusive language or behavior to those who abuse you. I no longer want you to hate those who hate you. Imagine with me. Find a different way, an upside down way that works, if even for a moment, until it becomes a lifetime. “

Jesus invites us into these imagined alternatives, very cleverly. The people he was speaking to would have laughed aloud at his examples, so ludicrous were they. But through the foolishness of his examples, he was able to break open their minds to see an alternative world. I can almost hear the audience chuckling and laughing aloud, until they heard the seriousness in his voice.

Consider what Jesus says about giving the cloak. Here’s the situation: a poor person who literally owns nothing but the clothes on his back, an outer garment and an undergarment is being sued for what little he has left. So, Jesus counsels, “If anyone wants to sue you and take your outer garment, give your undergarment as well.” Which means the person would take off his undergarment and walk out of court stark naked. Curious folks would undoubtedly crowd around and ask, “What’s going on?”. The entire economic system would be unmasked for what it is – a system that milks the poor for the benefit of the rich. It is the jester’s way of “speaking truth to power, if even for a moment.”

Or consider what Jesus says about turning the other cheek. In Jesus’ time, if someone struck your right cheek, and they were right-handed, it meant they had to use the back of their hand to make the strike. Take a moment to imagine that. In Jesus’ time, this backhand slap was a sign of domination, used by masters to slaves, husbands to wives, superiors to inferiors, in the social hierarchies of Jesus’ day. But if someone struck you with their open hand or fist, it meant you were equals, or even inferior. So, when Jesus says, “If someone strikes you on the *right* cheek,

then turn your cheek, which would have then exposed your *left* cheek, and the only option of the abuser would be to hit that one with an open hand or fist, and that would have displayed inferiority of the abuser. Now, this would not be an act of passivity. Instead such a move creates an extraordinary situation. The abuser is stuck! What to do? And for a moment, perhaps just a moment, the social order is interrupted. Possibly a space is created where something new is imagined, something new might happen, seeds of peace are planted.

Or consider “going the second mile”—my favorite example. A Roman soldier was permitted to force someone to carry his equipment for one mile – but no further. The practice had been abused so a law was enacted to limit the demands a soldier could make: one mile, no more. So, Jesus says, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Can you imagine the scene at the end of that first mile?

The soldier says, “Okay that’s enough. We’ve gone one mile. You can put down my stuff and return to your business.”

But the person carrying the supplies replies, “Oh, I’d be happy to carry the equipment a second mile.”

“What?” the soldier replies, “You can’t do that. It’s against the law.”

“But I’d really like to help you out. Please let me carry it another mile.

“Hey, I could get in trouble for that, fined or flogged. What are you up to?”

“I just want to help out. Could I please carry the equipment another mile?”

A wrench is thrown into the Imperial Machine, and it grinds to a halt, even if just for a moment. Possibly a space is created where something new is imagined, something new might happen, seeds of peace are planted.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of this approach of aggressive non-violent resistance: he said it was not enough to “bandage the victims under the wheels of injustice, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.

This is what Jesus is teaching us today in our gospel lesson. Jesus, the jester, showcases various aspects of an oppressive social order. At the same time, Jesus subverts the “law of retaliation” by imagining alternatives to violent resistance. Jesus seeks to set us free from the presumption that is killing us, sometimes literally and other times figuratively in regards to our soul—the necessity of violent retaliation. Jesus invites us to live in the world in new, imaginative, even foolish ways.

Jesus continues this thread of nonviolent retaliation in his mandate to us to love our enemies. Now certainly we don’t see Jesus running around hugging his political and religious enemies, or those who oppose his core message and identity, or those who intend to harm him. So, we know “love your enemies” doesn’t mean a demonstrative display of affection to those who oppose us. And he certainly calls his enemies all sorts of nasty names, such as “brood of vipers”, “hypocrites”, “serpents”, so we don’t need to imagine loving our enemies means never speaking out against them, and we know from previous study, that love in the Jesus’ gospels

does not necessarily refer to a warm and fuzzy emotion, but rather action. So, let's imagine for a moment what "loving our enemies" could look like for us.

Can for those of us who hold a prophetic voice in our heart, "love our enemies" means calling them out on their oppressive behavior, by speaking truth to power, as Jesus did so many times?

Can for those of us who are peacemakers at heart, "love our enemies" means holding people together in conversation, for a moment or for a lifetime, set within strong boundaries of what is acceptable to do or say, and rooted deeply in prayer?

Can for those of us whose hearts are on fire for justice and mercy for all, "love our enemies" means standing with those who are oppressed and abused, until they find their own voices of protest?

Can for those of us who see into the brokenness of others, "love our enemies" means to reach deep into broken souls, and pull them from wallowing in their suffering, despair, and contempt, into the healing Jesus offers?

Can for those of us who don't know what else to do, see a way of "loving our enemies" as being the very best we can be, behaving and doing the works that model the behavior we wish to see in our enemy?

Are these ways we can imagine to "love our enemies", to pursue a course of nonviolent retaliation against violence done unto us, of breaking the cycle that is killing us all? These ways may seem ludicrous, foolish, unrealistic, and mostly ineffective. But the jester Jesus, who turns everything upside-down and inside-out, wants us to open up space for the new kingdom to come near. This is why we work so hard in making our baptismal vows real in our lives, so the kingdom of God can come near.

Coming to the table, feasting on the love of Jesus, nurtures within us an alternative imagination. For this table continues the foolish, crazy table manners of Jesus. Jesus' meal practices certainly qualify as the actions of a jester. Jesus was always eating with the wrong people: the unclean, the outsiders, the tax collectors, the sinner. He just never seemed to get it. At the Last Supper, he even ate with the one who would betray him and those who would desert him. Jesus made everyone welcome at his table, and so are you, for in doing so,, Jesus was reimagining the whole social order. As he ate and drank, Jesus was turning that old world upside down and inviting everyone to feast together in a new creation. That's the crazy vision of this table, and of the vision in the Sermon on the Mount. This is the joyful feast of the people of God. Jesus imagined people will come from north and south and east and west and all people will come to this table together, and in peace, if just for a moment, or for a lifetime. So, come, imagine, and feast on something new.

Amen.