

#755 A Perfect World

This week's Thursday Theology is by Steve Albertin, another member of the editorial team whose work often appears in this space. It's a short homily that Steve gave on Matthew 5:38-48 at the Fourth International Crossings Conference this past January. Although it's not an Advent sermon, it's well suited to this time of year, because it touches on that great Advent theme of looking forward to the age to come, when all things will be made perfect and new.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"A PERFECT WORLD" Matthew 5:38-48
Crossings Conference
Tuesday, January 24, 2012
Prayer at Midday
Steve Albertin

These are some of the most well-known words in all of the New Testament. "Turning the other cheek" and "going the extra mile" have almost become clichés. They are startling, surprising, unsettling...and dangerous. I would like to have a dime for every time I have heard some streetwise realist complain, "Pastor, maybe you could live that way in a perfect world, but not in the real world."

The entertaining National League infielder and hall-of-fame baseball manager Leo "The Lip" Durocher put it well once when he tried to motivate his players by reminding them that "nice guys finish last."

What do you do when someone breaks into your home and threatens the life of your family, when someone attacks you in a dark alley, when someone tells lies about you in order to ruin your reputation? Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give the thief not only the keys to your car but your checkbook as well? This might make sense in a perfect world but not in the real world.

The law of retribution, *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," cited by Jesus, actually makes much more sense. It was a humane way to make sure that punishment remained proportionate to the crime committed. Without it violence would only escalate. It was an enlightened attempt to restrain the impulse for revenge. There is always a danger that our retaliation will be more severe than the hurt inflicted. When somebody does us wrong and we seek to get back, get even, and get our pound of flesh, there is always the temptation to make that one pound of flesh into two or three pounds of flesh. We reason, "This will teach the bully never to do that again."

We are all for law and order, a strong police force, and getting what you deserve, until the flashing red light appears in our rearview mirror. We are all for getting what you deserve until we are the ones who can't pay back what we owe. We are all for retaliation until we discover that retaliation only escalates and worsens the conflict. When differing opinions become bloody lips and black eyes, we wonder what happened.

As if this was not enough, Jesus makes matters worse by forbidding the retaliation that seems so justified. Jesus pulls out the rug from under us just when we thought we were learning how to survive in a world where evil must be resisted and getting what you deserve is a way of life. Jesus switches course midstream. He decides to drive the wrong way on a one-way street. He tells us that we ought NOT to give others what they

deserve. He wants us to give gifts to those who will never thank us. He insists that we care for those who don't give a rip about us. He expects us to cooperate with those who want to destroy us. You don't just let your enemy strike you on the cheek, you offer him the other one as well. If a stranger wants your coat, you don't just let him have the coat. You take him home and let him pick from your closet. If the boss forces you to walk one mile, you don't just go the one mile. You volunteer to go a second mile...without pay. You don't just love those who are nice to you. You love those who would kick dirt in your face, who would rob you blind, and who might even take your life. You love your enemies.

What is going on here? In what kind of world does Jesus think we live?

Unless...what Jesus is talking about here are not demands that we must meet or rules that we have to follow. What if the perfection that God demands is the perfection that Jesus gives? What if, contrary to what we can see, feel, measure, and calculate, we do live in a perfect world?

That startling promise is what lies hidden behind the seemingly impossible and irrational demands of Jesus. What Jesus demands FROM us, He does FOR us. He would turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love His enemies, pray for those who crucified Him and suffer the consequences. He seemed like a fool. He naively believed in perfection in the midst of an imperfect world. He trusted in God when everyone else wanted him to retaliate. So, God raised Him from the dead confirming Jesus' faith. Jesus was no fool and had every right to believe that he could change the world, forgive our sins, and give us the perfection He demands.

We receive that perfection at the font, the table, from the Scriptures, in this imperfect world whenever the perfect Promise

is spoken. Despite our imperfections, Jesus declares us perfect. A perfect world begins.

Trusting that promise, Jesus' unreal demands become tantalizing promises.

Someone strikes us on the cheek. They expect us to come back swinging, hoping that we do so that they will feel good about hitting us again. What if we turn the other cheek to the one who struck us? What if we gift the one who was secretly planning to steal from us? What if our enemy discovers that we are praying for him? We will begin to disarm him. It will no longer be so easy for him to think of us as his enemy. Miraculously, as if it were a miracle worked by God himself—which, of course, it is—our enemy begins to think of us no longer as an enemy but as a friend, even a brother or sister. Who else would love him this way? Certainly not his enemy, but Christ and those who are his disciples do.

And suddenly the perfect world that seemed so farfetched is real, here, among us already...now!

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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