

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

A PERFECT WORLD?!

Matthew 5:38-48

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

38“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.’

43“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’”

Note: In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addresses his disciples, the insiders, in this section, using military metaphors when referring to relationships in his/our communities of faith, where all is not well and how we become whole.

DIAGNOSIS: A Perfect World? No. The Enemy Within and Without

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Taking It Out on the Neighbor Within*

We live in an imperfect world, we all know it, and much to our chagrin, our congregational life as well, leaves much to be desired. Jesus catalogues the breakdowns in our life together, where we take our anger and enmity out on one another, congregations consumed by in-fighting, sometimes in fateful death struggles, pastors and people conniving, backbiting, withholding support emotionally and financially, embroiled in internal disputes and divisive combat, even resorting to action in the courts, enemies of the body of Christ. Caught up in a cycle of retaliation, we can behave like children of the Evil One, becoming a scandal to the world.

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Losing Our Brothers and Sisters*

In one of the “Pogo” cartoons many years back, the author comments, “We have found the enemy and it is us.” Losing our relationship to “our Father in heaven” (v. 44), we have, according to Jesus, lost sight of the Father’s love, loving our own, those who fit an image of our making, whether race or social group or party or club, despising the Father’s love who “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (v. 45). In which case, Jesus says, we are no better than the tax-collectors, some of whom connived and cheated and exploited for gain, we ourselves sometimes a company of self-centered, God-hating enemies of the community Jesus founded.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Finding, Then, the Enemy Without*

In doing so, we create disorder and disruption within the

Christian community and end up distancing ourselves from our Brother and Lord who gathers us, deserving to be excommunicated. No longer able to love the neighbor, we become the enemies of God, as Jesus made quite clear in other places in his Sermon, citing the lesser righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, "...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20), or doing worship to God while despising our sister and brother, "...you will be thrown into prison [never getting] out until you have paid the last penny" (v. 26), or addressing the Lord in worship while distressing the neighbor in our midst, "...I never knew you; go away from me, you evil doers" (7:23). And so, we run the risk of being taken out ourselves, inviting judgment and getting what we deserve, living by the sword and dying by the sword, being dismembered from God-all that coming from the mouth of Jesus.

PROGNOSIS: A Perfect World? Yes! The Neighbor Within and Without

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Taking the Neighbor In*

Jesus would say all this, exposing our loss of community and our alienation from the Father, hoping that he might hold our attention long enough for us to hear the good news, as he has something more to say to us and to do for us. Therefore, Jesus stands among his communities of faith around the world, right here in this place, as the One who breaks the cycle of disunity, dismemberment, death, and damnation. His ministry, from the time he was baptized until his crucifixion, was a taking in of the needs of his neighbor, all of us, all of whom violate or suffer violation within the body of believers, who have become enemies, all of us in need of healing and wholeness, inclusiveness and forgiveness, what Jesus means by the word "perfect" (v. 48). Yes, in order to make us perfect, he will engage the Enemy, whose power hangs over us, taking the enmity, ours and God's,

suffering it all away, creating something new. In our place, Jesus will be treated like a criminal, beaten, stripped naked, forced to go the last mile for us (vv. 39-41), where he will pray for his enemies, those who persecute him (v. 43), in fact, will love them. Here is Jesus, who is one with the Father (John 10:30), doing the Father's perfect will, breaking into a world at war, entering our scattered communities of faith, into this fellowship gathered here today, with something completely new, a new world, a new existence, what Jesus calls, "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven." He is here among us as the forgiveness of God, the healing of the Holy Spirit, where love happens.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Inviting us Into His Neighborhood*

What is all that, other than Jesus' invitation to join him, to become his disciples, to find our life within the community of his presence, where as our Lord and God he is now the Neighbor, our Brother and Sister, embracing us in our Baptism, fellowshiping with us in the Eucharist? He is among us as the gift of the Spirit, calling us to receive his love, believe his word, rejoice in his gifts, and be transformed by his divine and human neighborly presence. He invites us to be taken in by a love that covers our sins and losses, to trust a promise that will carry us the distance. There is no doubt that we need the community of his bodily presence, to know the dignity and safety and health of the neighborhood he creates, without which we could not be his disciples.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *A Neighborhood for the World*

Furthermore, our fellowshiping together with him, as we share the perfect love of the Father, has but one purpose, that our interacting with him leads to our interfacing with the world. Let our scandal of offense not be that of our infighting and

exclusivity but rather how we love one another, how we bear one another's burdens, how we are neighbor to the poor, the stranger, the outcast, how we become a neighborhood for the world. Jesus' ministry on behalf of us is perfected, completed in our ministry for the sake of the world. As we grow in his image, where forgiveness overcomes retaliation, where patient suffering replaces power, where the poor are rescued, we become his humanity, impacting the culture in a healing, saving way, transforming it. Jesus in his sermon already affirmed that we are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world," (5:13-14) with a purpose, that the world "may see (our) good works and give glory to (our) Father in heaven" (5:16). It is time that the people of God give up being enemies of one another and the world and become, like our Lord, the neighbor to all and for all, beginning right here.

Almighty and ever-living God, we thank you for having fed us with the body and blood of our Savior Jesus Christ, assuring us thereby that we are truly members of his body, the Church. And we ask you to help us by your Holy Spirit that we may continue in this fellowship and do the good works which you desire us to do; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, to whom, with you and the same Spirit, be all honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen. Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And may almighty God, the Father, the + Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless you. Amen.

"Worship Supplement," Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis,

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