

## **Lessons Along the Way: On a Moral Imagination**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 5:38-48  
on February 19, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

As the story goes, Mullah Nasrudden once found a diamond by the roadside. Muslim law dictated that finders became keepers only if they first announced their find in the center of the marketplace on three separate occasions. Ever the religious-minded man, Nasrudden was too pious to disregard the law but too greedy to run the risk of parting with his valuable find. So on three consecutive nights, when he was sure that everyone was fast asleep, he went to the center of the marketplace and there announced, in a whisper: "I have found a diamond on the road that leads to the town. Anyone knowing who the owner is should contact me at once." No one, of course, was the wiser for his words, except for one man who couldn't sleep and happened to be standing at his window on the third night, when he heard Nasrudden mumble some words. When he attempted to find out what it was, Nasrudden replied, "I'm in no way obliged to tell you, but this much I shall say, being a religious man, I went out there at night to pronounce certain words in fulfillment of the law." As one storyteller moralized from this tale: "to be properly wicked, you do not have to break the Law. Just observe it to the letter."<sup>1</sup>

### II.

That distinction between the letter of the law and the heart or spirit of the law has formed the ground of our exploration of the Sermon on the Mount over the past two weeks. We're knee deep into Jesus' lessons along

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony de Mello, *Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations*. As first read here: <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/022314.html>

the way of faith, and today, we finish the final two of six “you have heard it said, but I say to you” statements. Remember, these lessons give us a window into what matters most to Jesus – not a new moral code, but rather a new freedom in the relationships between and among God and God’s people.<sup>2</sup> Last week, we heard lessons about anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths. Today, Jesus sits us down in his school of love, not as “Lecturer-in-Chief” but as lover of all, teaching his disciples the way of nonviolence and the scandalous nature of love.<sup>3</sup>

Now if we thought it would be mild or easy, a “pretty good” or “do the best you can” kind of love, we would be sorely mistaken. Because Jesus demands us to practice a love that will inevitably lead to the way of transformation. You see, when conventional wisdom encourages violence for violence – eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth – Jesus says to turn the other cheek, force the attacker to not just backhand you as unequal, but then look you in the eyes as an equal to lay bare the wrongness of the violence and preserve your dignity.

And in a culture where most people wore two items of clothing, Jesus says don’t just give one cloak, give another, even if that means you’ve effectively shed yourself of all your clothes yet clothed yourself in agency and courage.

And in a world where soldiers could demand servants to carry their baggage up to a mile, Jesus says don’t just go one mile, go another, sever the ‘tit-for-tat’ cycle, even if that meant befuddling a soldier and breaking the law in the process. And in a religion when it was easy to love those who love you

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Moore, ed. *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p83.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to James K. A. Smith for the “lecturer-in-chief” image from his book, *You Are What You Love*.

back, and palatable to love your neighbor, even to love a stranger, Jesus says to love your *enemies*, to pray for those who persecute you.<sup>4</sup>

This, Jesus says, this is active love, this is how you are to be completed in Love. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father was perfect,” he concludes. “Be *telos*,” the Greek here says – not perfect as in achieving moral accomplishment or error-less living, but *telos*: completing a goal, or reaching the intended outcome. For example, the *telos* of a grapevine is to produce grapes, or the *telos* of a car or a plane or a train is to get passengers from one place to the next.<sup>5</sup> So instead of “be perfect,” we might hear: “be complete in showing love,”<sup>6</sup> or “set no bounds to your love, just as God’s love knows no boundaries either.”

### III.

You and I both know that this type of love can feel terribly hard, if not downright impossible. We shift and move and wrangle around texts like these, wondering (however fruitlessly) if these words of Jesus are better left in the first century where he uttered them, better understood in his context, better interpreted as figurative than literal, and surely more possible for the disciples and crowds who were hearing him that day. Because the world in which we live is one of bullies in the schoolyard and the boardroom, exploiters in our courts and conglomerates and families, liars in offices and in office, enemies in far-flung terrorist cells and in our very souls.

Yet when life happens: when sickness incapacitates, bills stack up, fear mounts, and responsibilities weigh heavily, who among us has the capacity or

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<sup>4</sup> Much of this unpacking of Jesus’s way of nonviolent resistance comes from Walter Wink’s concept of “The Third Way,” as explained in many of his works. See

<http://cpt.org/files/BN%20-%20Jesus'%20Third%20Way.pdf> for more.

<sup>5</sup> David Lose’s interpretation of *telos* has been most helpful in my preparation.

<http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-7-a-telos/>

<sup>6</sup> *Common English Bible* translation of Matt 5:48

the energy to love your enemies like this, when we struggle simply to love our neighbors or our families or ourselves or God? Who among us has the bandwidth to seek out the way of nonviolence, when we feel like the naysayers in our lives are just waiting for us to mess up, or when we just can't stomach one more Facebook post from Aunt Evelyn again? Wouldn't Jesus be just as happy with us if we could get better at loving well those who love us back? Oh yes indeed: "to be properly wicked, you do not have to break the Law. Just observe it to the letter."

But man oh man: when we refuse to return violence for violence, imagine how it would bankrupt our world's Departments of Defense, the NRA, street gangs, dictators and war criminals! No one will be asking teachers to carry guns, or demanding body cameras on law enforcement, or needing cameras and alarms for their doors, or carrying pepper spray when they go for a run at night.

When we refuse to pile on each others' enemies at every turn, imagine how it would destroy comment sections all over the internet, and backhanded office gossip, and that guy from high school who used to laugh at your failures! No one will fear for their lives because of who they love, or how they vote, or the way in which they show up in the world.

When we chose the third way, the more excellent way of love, imagine how it would disrupt every power system we know, utterly upending the way of the world and exchanging it for the way of Love! No one would be left behind or left on their own. Then might our joy be made *telos*, made complete, made full. So friends, hear the good news: *this kingdom, this dream of God in this world is at hand!*

But let's be clear about what that would ask of us, pricey like giving up a dazzling diamond prize. About Jesus' way of Love, Richard Rohr reminds us: "[this] is considered the most radical, demanding, and truthful of all of Jesus' teaching. Until there is love for enemies, there is no real transformation, because the enemy always carries the dark side of your own soul. Normally those people who threaten us carry our own faults in a different form. The people who really turn you off are very much like you."<sup>7</sup>

"Jesus wasn't playing when he gave this command," Dr. King reminds us. "He was serious. ... Because within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals. The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls 'the image of God,' you begin to love him in spite of – no matter what he does, you see God's image there. There is an element of goodness that he can never slough off."<sup>8</sup> The image of God, gift and grace that is buried deep within each of us, that it is unable to be touched by the flaws that cloud the dazzling surface of our lives. That's where this kind of love begins.

#### IV.

In just a few moments, many of us will head downstairs to Kelly Auditorium to hear and share the State of the Church presentation, a sort of "annual review" on the shape of our life together and a "wide-angle view" on the landscape in which we live. We'll look carefully at the effects of these past

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, 157.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p142-143.

three years of the pandemic on the state of churches, and how our church has held through it. We'll connect the dots to the last several years of institutional change – from our buildings, to our mission and vision, to our Confession of Identity – and focus our attention not on where we are, or why we are, or who we are, but for now, **how we are.**

*How we are the community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people. How we are the church who priorities cultivating the well-being of children, mitigating poverty in our community, becoming a teaching and learning church, and growing in number and faithfulness. How we organize our life together – from building, to staffing, to governing, to funding – in order to live out this calling to which we have been called. How we sustain God's work of Love in and through our church over the long haul so that all who are caught in the orbit of our congregation experience no less than God's transforming Love, right here among us.*

We'll hear facts and figures, mine some data, track attendance patterns and volunteer engagement, pay attention to pageviews, likes, and follows, catalog giving trends and membership growth. We'll then start drawing clear connections between the current shape and the future shape, and consider how overlapping and intersecting issues might prompt creative, adaptive solutions. We'll hold the diamond that is our beloved community up to the light so that each and every facet becomes visible for all to see. Our curiosity will stir, and our hope will mount. I'd be lying to you if I said my stomach wasn't full of nervous and excited butterflies for all that may emerge from our time together!

**But.** If in the midst of all the dreaming and discerning, truth-telling and truth-receiving, shared accountability and responsibility, looking forward and looking well, the diamond of our church dazzling in the transfigured light of Christ – if in the midst of all of that we were to forget the whole point of it all, that which is right at the heart of our life together – that is, the fierce and full love of God revealed in Jesus which animates the abundance of life for all creation and with whom we have the holy privilege of committing the breadth and length and height and depth of our lives in service of his – I reckon we’d be like the guy who whispers the law into a sleeping world and runs away content that he’s done his sacred duty.

V.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the author of *The Little Prince*, says this: “if you want to build a ship,” he counsels, “don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”<sup>9</sup>

Brothers and sisters, God in Christ has a dream for this world: one where love becomes the fuel, the life force, the energy of our very being. It is a love that transforms cheeks and cloaks and miles. It is a love that turns enemies into neighbors, and neighbors into beloved community, and beloved communities into relentless agents of God’s transforming love in this world.. It is a love that becomes *telos*, complete, and dare I say even perfect through the perfect God who loves us perfectly too. It is a love as dazzling as the purest diamond and as endless as the greatest sea. It is the love that makes us whole.

For that, we say, ‘thanks be to God!’

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<sup>9</sup> Exact citation for this unknown; shared with me from my pastor friends!