

**Sermon “It’s Not Easy”**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday March 16, 2025**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

A few weeks ago, during the children’s time, I had asked what we do when there is someone being mean to us and I have been thinking about the children and young people’s answers ever since. They said you could ignore them, walk away, stay away from them, and one additional answer of, “you punch them” and then their brother yelled, “no, that is the opposite of what you should do!” A lot of these answers include avoiding or ignoring the person being mean. I will admit, Grayson and another little one were being picked on during their bus ride, and we told him to just ignore it, because that is the easiest thing to do. Don’t engage, don’t pay attention, their words do not mean anything about who he really is. For any of us who have had to face bullies, either at school, at work or in the world it is often easiest to not engage. Now Grayson and his seatmate on the bus did hatch a plan for revenge but it involved them growing up and becoming spies, so I am not certain it was all that practical.

It is difficult, when living in a divided world to know how to respond to people who mean us harm. We often cannot afford to ignore it, or not engage, but what should our response be? It has been odd watching that play out in our own country over the last month and a half. We have a reputation of being one of the politest countries in the world, with our self-deprecating sense of humour and our propensity to apologize. It was shocking for everyone when Canadians began booing a certain national anthem, but I believe it was a sign of collective frustration and an uncertainty over how to express it. Since then, people have started doing

other things like buying local, in cases where possible changing travel plans, among other things. It feels almost impossible to really know how to feel or respond.

Today when we read about Jesus' sermon on the plain, it can be a challenging piece of scripture. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, and offer the other cheek when we are struck. This ethic of generosity and love is how Christians are to live in a hostile world. However, the theological problem of this passage is that it can, "encourage passive response to violence and evil." This lands us in a quagmire, with no easy way out.

Jesus coming into the world makes a difference. "In fact, the inbreaking of God into human history makes all the difference in the way we respond to other people." It affects how we care for others, how we respond to challenges, and how we live in the world. However, when up against violence or evil it is difficult to know how to respond. What happens when the perpetrator does not understand that their actions are wrong—or worse does not care? What happens when an abusive person sees "turning the other cheek" as encouragement to keep abusing someone? What would happen if a country like Ukraine turned the other cheek? They would simply no longer exist.

So how do we as Christians live out the teaching from the Sermon on the Plain? Well one distinction that is helpful to remember is that there is a difference between compliance and resistance to evil. Jesus' teaching is not letting perpetrators off the hook nor, is it meant to allow injustice and evil to flourish. As disciples in God's kingdom, we are reminded to love our neighbour as ourselves. We are to help the widow, the orphan, and those who suffer injustice. It is a reaction born out of love for another and not out of hatred. Martin Luther King Jr. was a

wonderful example of resistance not through violence but through love. Honestly, I believe love is a far more difficult path than to react out of hatred or anger. If we see someone being oppressed, or hurt or, who has nothing, we use our voices and our hands to help. In the example of the good Samaritan, it was the religious leaders who passed by on the other side of the road, and it was the person who was considered an enemy who stopped and helped. The Samaritan was living out the message of the Sermon on the Plain.

This sermon teaches us first that we are to resist in love and not be compliant with evil. It also teaches us to break cycles of retribution. As the saying goes, “An eye for an eye leaves everybody blind.” On a small scale we have been watching this play out in our house the last few weeks. For whatever reason the boys have been fighting like cats and dogs more than usual. One gets mad, hits the other, the other hits them back, and it becomes a whole thing. We have been talking to them about it, and when they are not mad at each other it makes great sense, but once one of them starts its all over and they react out of their emotions. It is hard, especially when we are angry, we have been hurt or have been wronged not to react out of frustration. Jesus encourages us to take a step back, and to react out of patience and love. Which leads to the other thing I am going to mention today.

Not only is responding in the way Jesus teaches difficult, but it is something we are likely unable to do on our own, “because the very idea of forgiveness is radical and powerful...Jesus knows full well that we will never love our enemies without an amazing grace that transforms us and makes us different than we are. Like the musician, the academic, or the athlete, who train body, mind, and spirit and become what they need to be to practice their craft, we too can become more than the sum of our parts. Yet the hard truth is that practice might make us better,

but it will not make us Christian. What changes us and allows us to love is a grace greater than our sin, our best intentions, or even our hard work.” We can only live out the Sermon on the Plain through the love and grace of God.

It would be nearly impossible for us to resist in love, to break cycles of retribution, and to live out the gospel without God’s grace. N.T Wight says, “Think of the best thing you can do for the worst person and go ahead and do it. Think of what you’d really like someone to do for you and do it for them. Think of the people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead...this list of instructions (from the sermon on the plain) is all about which God you believe in—and the way of life that follows as a result.” Sometimes when we see people who act out nastily or cruelly and claim that it is Christian it can be jarring. It is easy for society to tie their image of Christianity to that small handful of decidedly unchristian behaviour. God becomes an old man with a white beard sliding the beads of an abacus back and forth based on whether we are “bad” or “good.” Or we work to climb the ladder of “good behaviour” and “proper Christianity” to be worthy of heaven.

Sadly, the joy of Christianity becomes lost. The generous, merciful and grace filled God is replaced by a judge. We lose sight of what it means to live a life guided by the living breathing holy spirit. To be a Christian and acting out love in the world. My prayer is that we are able to live out the Sermon on the plain as best we can, showing God’s endless love in the world. And when we get it wrong, as we all will from time to time, that through God’s mercy, we find our way back. During this second week of Lent, may we grow in love, break harmful cycles, and offer our best to the world around us.