

" Brother, You Asked for It!"

I Corinthians 3:16-18; Matthew 5:38-45

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 21, 2016 – 2nd Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

It was a crisp September morning in Birmingham, Alabama, when Claude Wesley pulled up to his church. He left his little daughter, Cynthia, off for Sunday School and then drove to a nearby gas station to fill his tank. It would only take a few minutes and he would have plenty of time to get back before worship. Cynthia's lesson for the day was to be about Joseph.

"I was just a few blocks away when I heard the explosion," remembered Mr. Wesley. "I knew it was our church. I rushed back but I could not find Cynthia. I wanted to think she had left the church, but someone told me I'd better go to the hospital.

"There they asked me what she was wearing. I told them a little class ring. They pulled out her hand and I saw the ring. Then I saw her black patent leather shoes and her white socks. And I said, 'That's her.' I didn't want to see how she looked."

That was 1963. The country was shaken by this senseless act of destruction. Especially when violence is afflicted on innocent children, it is all the more shocking. Even strong segregationists decried this brutal action. People who had never even been in Birmingham shed tears for the innocent children who were killed there that beautiful fall day.

Our Gospel reading for this morning comes from the collection of sayings from Jesus that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with the Beatitudes, then is followed closely by a whole series of contrasts between the way things formerly were and the way they are to be from now on. These contrasts illustrate God's old covenant with the people and the new covenant which was, even then, in the making.

Each of these passages begins by saying, "You have heard it said ... " and then continues with Jesus' words, "But I say to you " Our passage for this morning comes quickly to its point as it falls into this formula.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and 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."

This is a direct challenge to a basic principle that the Hebrew people had lived under for hundreds of years, as in this passage from Deuteronomy: "Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." It allowed, indeed called for, measured retribution-- a response commensurate with the offense. A fair trade. No unlimited vengeance, it gave back simply what was inflicted but no more.

On the scale of life there is a convenient balance to all this. It assumes that a person deserves to receive in proportion to what they give. "Brother, you asked for it; so here it is! You do wrong to me and you get back in like kind." Action. Reaction. It's now all evened out.

It's strange how deeply those Old Testament words are embedded. "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." They don't seem to want to go away—and this despite what Jesus says. Hear them again in the context of our Savior's time.

"But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." You see, a blow on the right cheek with the back of the hand was an insult. Jesus says that we must be ready to be insulted even a second time, without giving in to our natural instinct to strike back.

"But I say to you ... if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." Now a coat is the long tunic with sleeves which is the basic item of wear for a man. The cloak is the heavier outer garment which was used for warmth and it also doubled as a blanket for the night. Jesus says if someone has no pity on you and takes you to court for even the coat on your back, then you may as well say, "Take it all my friend."

But I say to you ... if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." This refers to a practice where a Roman soldier could compel an Israelite to carry equipment for him as needed. It illustrates the difference of being a conqueror and being a subject person. Jesus says that if you are conscripted for such a purpose, unfair as it is, do what you need to do and even offer to carry the gear farther.

Now in each of these instances Jesus cites a person is being pushed beyond normal limits. He's being treated wrongly. The balance of power is clearly tipped in one direction only; yet each time Jesus cautions not to return a wrong in kind, even if it's justified. And why should that be the case? Well, it all has to do with the next contrast he lifts up.

"You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' And why should you do that when it doesn't seem to make any sense?"

"So that you may be children of your Father in heaven," continues Jesus. "For if you [only] love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

It's easy to love those who love us. There's nothing hard about that. It doesn't prove much of anything. But when you love somebody who doesn't love you, when you care about someone who could care less about you, when you are kind to someone who wishes you ill—it's then you are really put to the test.

Jesus continues: "And if you greet only your brothers or sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"

Here Jesus is referring to the usual Hebrew greeting "shalom... peace be unto you." Shalom implies every kind of material and spiritual well-being. It is really a prayer upon meeting someone, similar to saying "May all prosperity be upon you."

Now to offer such a prayer for someone you know, for someone you like, may not seem out of the ordinary. But to also greet someone whom you may dislike, even detest, with this prayer, is something else altogether. If offered sincerely it is much harder to do. It is closer to God's inclusive love, which is neither judgmental nor predicated on getting back in kind.

I can tell you— from observation and experience— that most people don't do so well in living by these words of Jesus. For many, it's as if they were not even included in the Bible. We hear them alright, but we still love the idea of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth." That concept is so satisfying. It feels good to retaliate after we've been hurt, and we don't really want to give up that gratification... willingly.

In human thought, it's only reasonable to pay others back accordingly. It's relatively easy to justify our actions. Besides, we love to make the case that a greater good is somehow being served by taking tit for tat. Yet, Jesus makes it clear that we are not to seek vengeance. We are called instead to respond to evil with good—to the greatest extent that we can.

Some will argue that this response isn't practical and makes us seem weak, but Jesus tells us that retaliation is sinful and that evil will never be overcome by evil. Either we believe him and act accordingly, or we do not. Either we rise to God's plane in response, or we sink to the level of the original wrong. That seems to be the choice we have. Those who want to follow Jesus must follow where he goes. It's the harder way but his way.

"They asked me what she was wearing," said that grieving father in Birmingham. "I told them a little class ring. Then I saw her black patent leather shoes and her white socks. And I said, 'That's her.' I didn't want to see how she looked ... I have not asked why it happened to us. I don't feel bitter about it. I'm just hurt because our daughter was plucked from us."

Jesus tells us this morning, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Sometimes it's hard, very hard, to fulfill those words—but it's always the higher road, the right thing to do.