

Matthew 5:43-48

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

“At Least Be Perfect”

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It's all so sad, and one of the reasons it's sad is due to the fact that we understand it. A first-grade boy, upset, in the principal's office, wanting to use the telephone. "I need to use the telephone, I need to call my mother." The principal asks, "Why, what's the matter? Is something wrong? Are there ways I can help?" "Well yesterday I forgot my sweater and I left it here at school. This morning my mother told me not to come home without it. I can't find it anywhere. I want to call and ask her where I'm supposed to go."

I don't know about you, but I'm tired of hearing about what we've lost and I'm tired of listening to people who don't know where we're supposed to go. I'm weary of pundits who are trying to elevate themselves by putting people down, especially our leaders. I'm annoyed by the silence of the church that seems to think that recessions are natural, that losing your job means you can't find one, that the downturn means there's nothing lifted up, and I'm irritated by the notion that, since we have less than we did, that leads to the idea that we have nothing. And the next person who comes up to me to complain about the rain... I'm going to ask them if they'd rather have the drought.

We don't seem to know where to go because of what we've lost, and this morning we call home. We come to church, we sit and we think and we call home. Is there an answer? I know that we have to be realistic. Walter Kronkite ended every news cast by saying to us, "And that's the way it is." There is that is life that is real, the way it is. Not much we can do about some of it. It is what it is. Plato was an idealist, but he knew life was real, and he knew it was hard. He was aware of the difficult. It is what it is. He was born a half-century before Jesus was born. His mother was part of a well-known political family, his father was related to kings, to royalty, but his father died when Plato was young.

Plato was an idealist but he knew, he learned the hard way, the way it is. His teacher was Socrates. Socrates was accused of corrupting young people by making them think. He was helping them launch out beyond established certitudes, forcing them to stand up to authority, pushing the frontiers of their ignorance. Putting questions to people, through the young people, to people who thought they had all the answers. He was dangerous to those whose quest had ended. He was a threat to those who had power and control. It's like the statement that was on the church bulletin board in England, "There are some questions that can't be answered by Google." And there are some people who think they

have all the answers. They have a problem with people like Socrates. People like that always have, and always will. They said he was a bad influence. They said he was leading young people to become intellectuals and rebels, and they arrested him and put him on trial, and threw him in prison, and then they executed him, by making him drink hemlock, because he searched for truth, a truth that they couldn't handle. Plato saw it and was distressed by it, the way it is. And all the rest of his life, Plato knew you have to be careful when you teach people to think. Plato knew it.

Jesus, as well, was an idealist, but he knew the way it was. The dark side of human experience, the grim side of life. At his last supper, when he met with his friends, it was on his mind that one of them would betray him, that the Romans wanted to come and get him, that his own people, especially the religious leaders, did not like him. One of his hand-picked trusted friends, he selected the one that would have him arrested and he knew it, and he said it. It is what it is. Realistic. The dark side of life.

We know the dark side of life. Our idealism is realistic, tempered by the way it is. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was right to say, "If you shield the canyons from the windstorms, you never see the beauty of their carvings." And Vernon Saunders was right when he said, "Experience is a hard teacher, because it gives you the test first, and the lessons afterwards." And playwright Harold Pinter was right when he said, "What poisons life is not what is known and spoken, but what is known and goes unspoken." That's the way it is. G. Robertson, in her day Miss North Carolina, married a former Duke basketball player, public speaker, in high demand. A trip to Philadelphia. The plane got in late at night, dragging a suitcase, her clothes wrinkled, looked like she'd spent five days in flight, her feet hurt, she was tired, her shoulder bursitis ached, her bags, in her opinion, seemed to have doubled in size. And the wheels on the bags were pulling her crooked. And the airport PA system was getting on her nerves. And she went to the escalator, and discovered it wasn't moving, and the sign "Turned off". Near the escalator an elevator, she dragged her bags around the corner to the elevator. The door, another sign, "Out of order." There was a man leaning against the wall, and she could tell by the writing on his shirt that he worked for the airport. "Well," she said, "I want you to know that I have just arrived at the City of Brotherly Love. Your escalator is turned off, and your elevator is out of order." He didn't move. He snapped his fingers, and pointed in her direction, and said, "That's right, Lady, and the Liberty Bell is cracked."

That's the way it is. Messiahs get crucified, teachers get arrested, liberty bells crack. Where do we go? What do we do? We call home, and we are reminded. Plato said it. In spite of the way it is, Plato said it. There is the idea of the good. There is the highest wisdom. It is the good. It is the beautiful. It raises our sights, lifts our attitudes, awakens us, inspires us. It is the soul of the universe. It lightens up everything. It is the absolute. And Jesus said, "You heard it - love you neighbor, hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemy. Pray for those that persecute you." And then he went on to say, it's not reported in the text, but I know he said it, he said "It's hard, very hard, what I'm asking you to do. Be perfect, even as God in heaven is perfect." And John Wesley picked up on that and said, "You know, we are moving on to perfection." He would add, if we're not

moving that way, which way are we moving?" The idea of the ideal, the way it ought to be.

I like the story of the pastor who was working on a funeral for a woman named Edna. The previous funeral at the church was for a woman named Mary, and the pastor asked the secretary to change the name in the ritual, the bulletin that would be handed out, so that everywhere it said Mary you change it to Edna. That happened, everywhere it said Mary it was changed to Edna. Just with the push of two buttons, it was easy. And the service came, and the congregation reciting the Apostles Creed, there was a little confusion when the pastor joined in with the people, reading from the bulletin, "I believe in Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Edna." We elevate Mary to the status of a saint. Jesus wanted to elevate Edna, and you and me, to the state of perfection. Be perfect, as God is perfect. Images of perfection, we are called to look higher, we are compelled to see further. Plato called it the Absolute, he said it was the Good. Jesus said, "You know, we're all God's children."

A woman and her grandmother, talking about a member of the family.. It was hot, in the summer, sitting on the porch, rocking back and forth. "This member of the family is just no good, he's completely irresponsible, he's lazy," the younger woman said. The old woman rocked back in her chair. "Yes, but Jesus loves him. He's bad, but Jesus loves him." The younger woman persisted. "I'm really not so sure of that." The older woman continued. "Oh yes, Jesus loves him. But of course, don't you know, Jesus doesn't know him like we do." And Jesus said, "You're a child of God. Be perfect. Know the good. Rise up to it, the way it ought to be, the way we ought to be."

This is usually where it ends for most, unless we call home, and if we call home, then we hear it. The way it is, compared to the way it ought to be. If we call home to God, the word comes back to us in one form or another. The question is, so what are you going to do about it? What's it to ya? That's the imperative. You take it the way it is, you see it the way it ought to be, and you do something. William Cavanaugh is going to be in our church the 23rd of this month. He's a theologian who has an interesting idea. He says, "I believe that we live in the intersection of two stories of the world. The Eucharist, and the marketplace. Both tell of hunger and consumption, of the exchanges and gifts of things as they are. And the stories overlap and compete. Eucharist, for example, tells the story of hunger and consumption, but it does not begin with scarcity, it begins with the one who came that we might have life, and that we might have it abundantly. When Jesus took the bread and the cup and offered it to his friends, he said, "Remember me. Remember all that I've done. You're going to do greater things. Remember what I've given you. You will give more. Remember me."

A United Methodist bishop told the story of the five-year-old granddaughter who, while the congregation was taking Communion, she walked up by herself. Later he asked, "Why did you do that?" and she said, "I came to the table to say Hi to Jesus." She got it. When we say Hi to Jesus, we're back in touch with abundant life. The Methodist church has these social principles. It is the imperative for us. God embraces all hues of humanity, delights in the differences, and so do we. God cries with the masses, despises the

disparity between the rich and the poor, and so do we. God deplores the violence in our homes, on our streets, and rebukes the world's warring madness, and so do we. God brings good news to the poor, release to the captive, and so do we. The story is told, there's no way it's true - a celebration in a town, all the churches invited, large auditorium. In the middle of the hymn sing, mass choir, a secretary walks in and announces that the building's on fire. The Presbyterians appoint a chairperson to appoint a committee to look into the matter and make a report. The Baptists cry out, "Where's the water?" The Quakers quietly praise God for the blessings that fire brings. The Lutherans post a notice on the door declaring the fire is evil. The Catholics pass the plate to cover the damages. The Congregationalists shout out, "Everybody for themselves." The Episcopalians form a procession and march out. The Christian Scientists declare there is no fire. The fundamentalists get up and shout, "It's the wrath of God." While we Methodists gather in the corner and pray. And the secretary gets a fire extinguisher and puts out the fire.

The imperative is put to us - "Put out the fire." In some cases, build one. Build a bridge. Reach a hand. Share the load. Do something. When you see the way it is, and you see the way it could be, come to the table. Make it right. I think there's a reason our church is growing, and an attitude that says, there are ways we can make the way it is, the way it ought to be. I think there are reasons. I think its - for one thing, did I mention we have the best library..... no, I've already mentioned that. The best library in the country. Wonderful adult classes. You get that brochure today. Youth on a mission trip. They get back at 4:00 this afternoon. Trying to build a house, if God will let us, with the rain, for Habitat for Humanity. The gifted artist who shares his talent. The children in classrooms that are fun. A music program that's got to be one of the best. Picnics, dunk tanks, web pages, outreach mission, it's what we have. But I think that's not the reason that our church is thriving. I think it's because of what people are scheming and dreaming to do. Not where we are, but where we're headed.

And I wanted to tell you, there will be a program. You're going to hear it announced in the next few months, don't tell anybody about this, it's called Love in Action. The Senior Council's planning to do this. A church-wide voluntary sign-up, 2000 people in this church volunteering to do something when the occasion arises. A ride to the doctor, a telephone call on a dark night, a listening ear, a reassuring handshake, a checkup on a vacant house, a light bulb put in or a light switch repaired, 2000 people all of us set up prepared to act. If a letter needs to be written, someone will do it. If a ramp for a wheelchair needs to be built, we get it done. If a walk needs to be shoveled in the winter or grass needs to be cut in the summer, if someone needs help, this church will mobilize to do it. Love in Action. Taking the Gospel seriously. Making disciples of all of us. Transforming the world where we live, and more. The way it is, the way it ought to be, what do we do about it? We call home, and there's an answer. For Plato, it's absolute good. Jesus calls it Abba. Brunner calls it the divine imperative. Barbara Brown Taylor calls it waking up. Arthur Miller calls it the idea. Annie Dillard calls it, when the stones talk. It's the absolute that draws us. It's the gospel truth, it inspires us. It's the Communion table, it reminds us. When we lose something important, and don't know where to go, or what to do, we come to the table we call home, and we do it often enough, it no longer

surprises us when we place that call, there's a message to us from the other end.
"Remember me," he said, "In remembrance of me," we sing.