

Suggestions for Bible Study Groups

Module Two – Week 1 – February 12, 2017

Prologue

Welcome back to Trinity's Bible Studies! This week we begin Module Two of our Bible Studies after taking a Christmas-New Year's break. I hope that you felt the near presence of our Lord during the days when we celebrated his nativity, the visits of the shepherds and magi, and his presentation in the Temple. If you were present for the Sunday Forum on January 29, you will know that the Sunday Gospel readings for the next few months will come from the Gospels of Matthew and John (with one brief foray into the Gospel of Luke). And you will know that our Bible Study gatherings are being structured so that you will be reading and reflecting together about the Gospel for the Sunday following the week in which you meet. Our hope is that this "preview" of the Gospel will help you pray your way towards the worship and preaching for the upcoming Sunday.

Each week, one of us will write a blog to help you focus your reflections and the discussion in your Bible Study group. The Gospel for the coming Sunday will be the focus of the week's blogging, but each blogger may choose to reflect a bit on one or more of the other readings as well, especially as they relate to the Gospel. Even if the blogger for that week does not reflect on any other reading in addition to the Gospel, you all should feel free to expand your Bible study reflections and discussions to include any or all of the other Sunday lections.

Bible Study – Matthew 5:38-48

These verses are a part of Jesus' inaugural sermon in the Gospel of Matthew, which we know by the name: The Sermon on the Mount. As Jesus delivers this teaching, it becomes clear that Matthew's Gospel is picturing him as the Christian community's great teacher/rabbi, and modeling Jesus as teacher on the mission and ministry of Moses, the great teacher of the Jewish community.

"You have heard that it was said.... But I say to you...." This is a time-honored rabbinic style of argument/teaching, and Jesus adopts it for his own. That he uses this specific device to make his argument suggests two things. First, like his Jewish forebears, Jesus is asserting that the Word of God does not interpret itself, but that all Scripture needs to be interpreted. By implication, Jesus is saying that there is no utterly singular way to understand a piece of Scripture. Many interpretations are possible, and Jesus is putting forward his own interpretation of the passage from Deuteronomy where "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is spoken about. (Deuteronomy 19:21) Second, by virtue of his "but I say to you....," Jesus is claiming authority as the teacher of his community of followers. He is, in effect, saying: "I have the right to be your rabbi, and authority over you. Listen to me with the same respect that has always been given to Moses and other interpreters of God's ways."

It ought to be noted that to our modern ears "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" can sound harsh, a merciless and vengeful way of meting out punishment for transgressions. But in fact, the standard of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was – when first promulgated in ancient Israel – an advance in mercy. It was far better than the usual practice of justice in the ancient world, where it was common for any wrong to be retaliated against with unrestrained blood revenge. By that older standard, if I knocked your tooth out, you – or your kin – could

come after my very life. In contrast, then, “an eye for an eye” was a distinct turn in the direction of mercy.

But Jesus’ commentary on the Deuteronomy passage takes the turn towards mercy even further. “Don’t resist an evildoer” at all, he says. Does he mean don’t resist physically? Or don’t resist in a court of law? Scholars disagree about that. Perhaps he means both. “If you are struck on the right cheek, turn the other also” suggests Jesus is counseling his followers to practice non-resistance physically, though it should be noted that being struck on the cheek was a possible part of punishment in court, and so Jesus’ counsel may apply to legal punishment specifically and not blanket non-resistance. (Note that at his trial before the Sanhedrin, when Jesus is struck on the cheek, he does not resist. See Matthew 26:67-68)

Another interesting anecdote as to how one might think about “turning the other cheek” came from a woman professor of dance at Goucher College where I was chaplain and professor in the 80s and 90s. As a dancer, she had studied eastern forms of self-defense, and when she heard this passage – while becoming a Christian – she said to the group of us studying together: “I think Jesus is counseling turning your body so that the negative energy of the one attempting to strike you simply goes by, and the striker misses you. Perhaps the striker even loses his/her balance as s/he tries to strike you the second time, and falls to the ground without harming you.” I have always thought this an ingenious and attractive possibility, and one I would never have come up with myself. Thus, it is also a marvelous example of why studying Scripture in a group is so valuable. In a group, we can hear the Spirit speaking through Scripture in different lively ways that alone we would not have imagined.

Jesus’ commentary on Exodus 22:25-26 deals with the restraints built into Jewish law to protect the poor from having not only the shirt off their back – “your coat” – but also their cloak taken from them by the judgment of a court. The cloak as an outer garment was not just something that could keep one warm, but was also understood to be one’s protection – a sort of sleeping bag – for the night. Jesus’ admonition seems to say, “Go ahead and give them even your cloak. It is better to go through life naked than to insist in court on your rights. Your utter trust in God’s generosity and protection will cover you.” Remember, it is not long after these verses that Jesus speaks the famous “Consider the lilies of the field” verses (Matthew 6:28-30). If you have romanticized that passage while reading it in the past you may want to reconsider. Taking this passage together with the “lilies of the field” verses, I hear Jesus saying something radical: “God will protect you and clothe you beautifully if you but trust. You’ll be as well clothed as the lilies of the field, even if you lose your shirt and your coat in court.”

Jesus’ words about being forced to go one mile is a direct reference to what Roman occupying forces could legally require of Jews. Any Jew could be requisitioned to go a mile with a Roman soldier as a guide or porter. Jesus – contrary to the Jewish Zealots counsel of resistance to this Roman “power over” – suggests that his followers choose to go a second mile. At first, it may seem that Jesus is suggesting wimpy total capitulation, unless one considers the wise insight of Viktor Frankl, the famous psychiatrist of the last century, who was himself imprisoned in a concentration camp by the Nazis. Frankl pointed out that the ultimate freedom we have is the freedom to choose the attitude we take towards what is happening to us. No outside person or circumstance can force an attitude upon us. This “choosing an attitude,” of course, is not an easy thing to do, and takes a lifetime of practice. But perhaps Jesus is inviting us to consider the wonderful possibility we have for freedom, even when others are trying to hem us in and compel us. Is it possible to take this “invitation into freedom” even one step further? Might we see this as Jesus inviting us to take one step in training ourselves spiritually to be

willing to believe in and practice the final freedom that we have as Christians? Namely, if through a lifetime of Christian living, we choose over and over not to be afraid of death (because we know that in Christ we will rise to new and everlasting life) then the ultimate weapon – fear of death – that others can use to try to control us disappears and we are utterly free.

In verse 42, Jesus admonishes us to give to anyone who begs from us, and not to refuse anyone who wants to borrow from us. If you are like me, I encounter at least once a week someone who is asking money from me. They are usually homeless men, though occasionally a woman will ask. Each time I have to decide what I will do, and what reason I will give to myself for my choice. It used to be that I would base my decision, or so I told myself, on my fear that any money I gave might be misused – for alcohol, or drugs, or some such. But over the years, I have heard the witness of a number of homeless people who have said something like this: “Even if you do not give money when one of us begs for it, you can give something else: the dignity of acknowledging that we are fellow human beings, looking us in the eye and saying, ‘Hello.’” Sometimes I give money; sometimes I do not. But I try always to look directly at the person begging, and say, “Hi.”

Verses 43-48 enshrine Jesus’ exalted teaching about the love of enemies. Again, he is playing off a verse from Hebrew Scripture, in this case Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor.” But one might well ask, “Where in Hebrew Scripture does it say, “Hate your enemy”? The brief answer is: “Nowhere.” But it is important to note that Jesus does not say, “Scripture says,” or “The Bible says;” rather he says, “You have heard it said.” The implication is that some commentators on Hebrew Scripture in Jesus’ time were interpreting the silence about how to treat enemies in Leviticus 19:18 as tacit permission to hate them. Jesus is saying, “Don’t go there.”

Often when people approach these verses on loving one’s enemy, the discussion gets hung up on how it can be remotely possible to love enemies or those who persecute you. Often one hears things like: “Well, I suppose one could love them, since it doesn’t say one has to like them.” But that sort of approach is based on a wrong assumption from the start. “Love” in most of Scripture has little or nothing to do with one’s emotional feeling about someone. Rather, love in Scripture has to do, not with feeling, but with action. To love is to act for the good of the other.

Notice that the center of Jesus’ teaching about how to treat one’s enemies is grounded on his insight into how God acts toward the evil and the unrighteous, i.e. the ones whom one might assume God would regard as enemies. He makes it clear that God does good towards them – by sending them sun and rain – just as much as God does good towards the good and righteous. We are to imitate God, then, in the way we act towards those who are our enemies, or those who persecute us. We are to do them good, no matter how we may feel about them. This is a high and hard calling. But perhaps not so unnaturally high and hard as it would be if we were to interpret Jesus’ words as saying that we should feel a sense of love towards those who have acted hatefully towards us, done us wrong, or persecuted us.

In the final verse of this Gospel reading, we hear Jesus command, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” At this point, I imagine the average Christian reader saying something like, “I give up. Are you kidding me? I can’t be perfect!” This is one of those verses where it helps immensely to know the original Greek that lies behind the word translated as “perfect.” The Greek word here is *teleioi*, a form of the Greek word *telos*. If you know English words like *teleological*, you will know that the Greek root word *telos* suggests something like: directed towards or aiming at an ultimate object or aim. So it is probably more accurate to

translate Jesus' words in this way, "Be mature/whole/directed to the ultimate good, as your heavenly Father is the completely mature and whole One, directed to the ultimate good of all Creation." If this way of thinking about Matthew 5:48 is right, then we can have hope about obeying Jesus' command. We may not now, and may not ever be, perfect in the sense of morally pure and good all the time. But we can be aiming at and directing ourselves towards the ultimate goal that is epitomized by God's way of acting: namely, we can hope to aim at the wholeness that comes from always acting for the good of all Creation. If we keep this goal always before our mind-and-heart's eye, then we will be like our heavenly Father, who never wavers from doing good, even to those who are evil.

[A footnote on this last verse. In Luke's version of these words, Jesus says, "Be merciful (or compassionate) just as your Father is merciful (or compassionate.)" See Luke 6:36. The Greek that Luke uses is a totally different word from *teleioi*. He uses the word *oiktirmones*, which suggests mercy, or pity, or compassion.]

For Reflection and Discussion

1. When you think about how justice should be meted out, how do you balance "punishment/payment for" and "mercy"? How do Jesus' words in this passage help you as you work on this issue?
2. What sense do you make of Jesus' admonition to "turn the other cheek?" Do you hear him counseling non-resistance? Is your view of Jesus' words impacted at all by what you know of the effectiveness of Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement in India, or the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's practice of non-violent resistance in the US?
3. How do you deal – in action and in your inner thoughts and feelings – with those who beg from you on the street? What part do Jesus' words play in that for you?
4. Can you think of a time when, with God's help, you have been freed and enabled to choose an attitude to some uncontrollable outward circumstance in your life? Or something that someone – a family member, friend, co-worker, or government policy – was compelling you to do?
5. Do you truly believe that God acts equally for the good towards both the evil and the good, the unrighteous and the righteous?
6. If being "perfect" means being like God in acting for the good of all others – even your enemies, those who have done you wrong or persecuted you – how would that look in action in your life? Does "loving by acting for the good of all" seem possible to you: in personal life, in the life of our church community, in wider political and economic life?

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