

Epiphany 7A - Matthew 5:38-48 – “Being surprising and creative Christians”

Read: ⁹ blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor^[1] and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Pray: Lord it’s so easy to let go and hate other people and see them as enemies. Speak to us today and reframe things for us that we might live creatively in your will and for your glory. In Jesus name, Amen!

“An eye for an eye”, “Payback”, “Revenge: a dish best served cold”. We say it with such a cold joy sometimes. Or maybe as Christians we tone down the language a bit.

If we don’t say it out loud, we think it. Having an enemy of one kind or another is common to us all. Our thought life can consume us with thoughts of how bad we think we’ve been wronged, hurt, humiliated – or had our rights impinged on. And it may well be justified!

It can be like a commercial that gets played over and over again in your mind – each time making us madder and madder. The thought of praying for these people can honestly have us scratching our heads can’t it? Or maybe we’d rather not say!

When we think enemies we think both large scale and smaller scale don’t we?

Whenever I go to the airport I’m reminded of all the media attention given to terrorism – the war on terror. Now the people who perpetrate these acts – are they my enemies? Maybe they are.

I’m reminded of it because of all the security I have to go through just so I can travel to see my friends or family. You almost have to take all your clothes off, walk through scanners and x-rays – it’s exhausting.

I’m reminded by all the announcements about not leaving baggage around – heaven forbid someone either take it or put something illegal in it. I’m reminded by people who look tense at airports. If you’re a people watcher you’ll see it too.

Last week we looked at hatred & murder, this week we’re being challenged to look at the world through a different lens. *To be Christians who live as surprising and creative people in hostile scenarios* both in the large scale world view, right down to our most intimate relationships.

- *What it **doesn’t mean** is that Christians have to be holy doormats for other people to wipe their feet on.*
- *What it **doesn’t mean** is that you can’t defend yourself when people act violently towards you. That’s not what this text is talking about at all.*

At the same time, remember that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is only going to lead to a blind and toothless society isn’t it?

We need to get a little more creative than simply biting people back when we feel hurt. More than this, wouldn’t it be great to surprise people – catch them off guard – so we can take a new and fresh approach as disciples and followers of Jesus?

So who are your enemies? As you think about that, there are probably a few thoughts entering your mind right about now. I wonder if they’re names... of people!?

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I wonder if they're names of Lutheran people, pastors' maybe, people from school, old friends who are no longer friends – but bitter rivals.

Could they be family members, husbands and wives, ex-boyfriends, girlfriends - people who live next door, down the street or over the back fence? And don't forget about the devil – the one behind every evil act and desire – who wants you to believe that people are your enemies and that reconciliation is impossible.

While an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth might sound appealing sometimes, this is one widely mis-applied part of scripture. So we don't want to get caught up in same mistakes right?

First of all let's clarify something:

When we feel hurt or angered by someone, **we want justice!**

God knows all about justice!

But in our anger what we might see as justice can get a little out of hand. At times we see it played out in sad news stories, bikie gangs and contract killings. That was exactly the point of an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth in the Old Testament.

It acted to restrict unrestrained vengeance like we see on the news. So if a person was injured, a judge (not the injured person) would decide on a fair compensation for that injury. *Otherwise a broken finger may be repaid with a gruesome death* in the heat of the moment. That is not what God intended!

The second point of clarification is in verse 43, where Jesus says, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’***

Now if any of you are brave and have your bible with you in church...then please look that up and tell me when you find it.....because I can't find it!

And the reason is that it's not in Scripture. No-where could I find in Leviticus 19:18 which Jesus is referring to the words...**and HATE your enemy.**” This was what the religious leaders were selling to the people.

Here is what Lev 19:18 actually says, ***“¹⁸Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”*** We are not called to hate or vengeance – even towards those we struggle with or see as enemies. Jesus is making the point today that any kind of personal revenge we might be seeking against anyone has been taken out of our hands. That means our physical hands and our thought life.

Instead the bible says, ***“²¹ If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. ²² In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”***

That is creative and surprising Christianity.

People expect their enemies to come back with escalating words or violence – instead you give them a sandwich and a coffee. It's going to surprise them!

It may even disarm them and change the scenario altogether.

When I first began studying quite some time ago there was a person in my class that I really struggled with.

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I even avoided them to try and protect myself from getting angry and losing my temper. I made the choice that it would just be easier to avoid them because any confrontation wouldn't go well.

God in His wisdom had a better idea – a creative idea that surprised me and caught me off-guard.

The more I avoided this person, the more they craved my attention. I couldn't get away from this person – everywhere I went I would run into them.

Eventually I invited the person for a cuppa and we ended up becoming very close friends – even to this day. I didn't think it was possible – but that is the God we worship. Our God is creative and can surprise us in every facet of our lives.

So where does the rubber hit the road for us? Where does the surprise come from? How can we be creative people when we're faced with potential enemies?

Well Jesus says, ⁴⁴ ***But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...***

Not only does Jesus give us the “how” and the “source” of our creativity, he also gives us the motivation to get it done.

Jesus teaches us to pray for our enemies. That's something that He also modelled for us didn't he? As Jesus hung dying on the cross he prayed for you and me and the world.

When his accusers hurled their charges at him, he didn't respond in self-defense. When they struck him, he didn't strike back. Instead he prayed,

“Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

That prayer was for us as much as those people standing by in biblical times. For you and me whose sin separates us from God.

The beauty of the gospel is that even though we've lived as though God doesn't matter – even like God's enemies, St Paul encourages us with these words, ⁶ ***You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*** ⁷ ***Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.*** ⁸ ***But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!***

When we see things from God's perspective, we can see just how creative and surprising the gift of His son Jesus really is. God's love in Jesus knew no bounds – even for his enemies. In fact God's love transformed enemies into disciples and children of God. And so here we are - that's our story! Thanks be to God alone!

As for the motivation Jesus gives us: He says

“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

The Sermon on the Mount started with a promise to peacemakers – can you recall what that promise is? **(That peacemakers will be called the children of God).**

As we live as creative and surprising people in conflict, we come to experience our Heavenly Father in an especially intimate way – being God's close sons and daughters, His children.

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We become in our experience of life, what we are IN FACT through our baptism: members of the family of God. This is a privilege and an honour!

Our motivation then is exactly the promise of the 7th beatitude, ***“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.”***

That truly does make a difference in the way we relate to one another. Instead of revenge, we pray for our persecutors. Rather than getting even with those who have wronged us, we love because God first loved us expressed in His work for you on the cross.

In Christ, the only getting even we do is getting even through love. It's not about “An eye for an eye”, “Payback” or “Revenge. That’s not how the 'close children of God' journey through this life.

Granted, Jesus hasn't promised that such selfless love will come easily. The easy response is always to escalate things, to bite back.

To be a disciple is to be creative in tough situations, prayerfully bringing our enemies – on the world scale and our most intimate relationships to God, asking what they can't ask for themselves – for peace with God and each other. Who knows, perhaps they'll even end up your friend!

May our creative God who formed the heavens, this earth and all the people who live in it, give you creativity in conflict and surprise you this week as you walk in His amazing love. Amen!

The peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen!