

The Extra Mile

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Year A – Matthew 5:38-48

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 23, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

The truck driver was incredibly relieved to finally pull his rig into the gravel covered lot next to the diner. It had been a tiring day – long stretches of tedious Interstate punctuated with the complex challenges of urban congestion and hyper vigilance through steep mountain grades. He had been running this route for years, and for nearly that long he had rewarded himself for completion of this portion of the trip with a stop at this very diner. After a quick visit to the bathroom to rinse off the grim of the road, the big man literally poured himself onto stool at the end of the counter – *his* stool – and took a heavy sip from the coffee the waitress already had waiting for him. They exchanged the pleasantries of people whose friendship had developed with the passage of those many years, but she didn't bother asking about his order, and he didn't bother looking at the menu. It was a Tuesday, after all, so he knew the special was meatloaf, and he had been looking forward to it for hours. His food was in front of him before he could take his second sip of coffee.

The meal was great, as usual. The conversation was *better*, as usual. The time the trucker had allowed himself before continuing his run toward night slipped by way too fast, as usual. With his meal halfway gone, the trucker looked up from his plate and out the window as he and the waitress heard the rough-throated roar of the trio of low slung motorcycles that lined up in front of the diner. The three filthy riders dismounted and stretched, one of them spit for distance, another struck a match to light a hand-rolled cigarette, each of them wore the same vested jacket, each emblazoned with the same sun-faded, grease-smear patch bearing the profane name of their "club." As they pushed open the door and swaggered into the diner, the language of their "conversation" was just as profane.

The "leader" of the group walked past the truck driver and the waitress, creating a wake that caused them both to wince with discomfort, and slumped into the booth furthest from the front door. His companions, on the other hand, leaned against the counter, one on either side of the trucker. "How's the food in this dump?" the one with the cigarette asked the waitress as he picked up the trucker's coffee cup. The other reached a grimy hand to the driver's plate, picked up the remaining piece of meatloaf and crammed it into his snaggle-toothed maw, before returning it to the plate. "Tastes like..." (well, you know what he said) then started to wipe his hand on his vest, finishing on the driver's shirt. "The coffee ain't too bad, though," the other laughed as he extinguished his cigarette in what was left of the driver's blue-plate-special and the two of them started toward the rear

The truck driver and the waitress exchanged a wry look as he scooped up his check. Then fishing into his wallet for a couple of bills, he laid both next to register, and giving the "gentlemen" in the back booth one last glance, he said to the waitress, "See you in a couple of days," and went out the door.

From the back booth, the leader let out a scoffing laugh as his companions joined him in the booth. "It doesn't look like your boyfriend is much of a man." The waitress looked out the window again as they heard the sound of big diesel accelerate the rig back onto the road, shook her head one more time and knocked the till to with a swing of her hip as the bikers' chuckling exploded into raucous guffaws. "I've always thought he was a pretty good man," she said as she cleared the ruins of the meal from the counter. "He's not much of a driver, though," she concluded as she backed through the swinging kitchen door, "on his way out of the lot, he ran over three motorcycles."

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek," Jesus said, "turn the other also." "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." What is Jesus thinking? Okay, be honest here. Let me see a show of hands. How many of you like the way the story ended better than you like this morning's Gospel lesson? Yeah, me too.

Since the Third Chapter of our Story, we human beings seem to be pretty much hard-wired for “fight or flight.” In the face of opposition, we will fight with whatever weapons are at our disposal, or we will run away and live to fight another day. In its most primitive form, that’s “The Law of the Jungle,” that’s “might makes right,” that’s “survival of the fittest.” One step up from that is the law of vengeance, the right to inflict the wrong done to us back on the doer, and to render the evil doer incapable doing us evil again. The law of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” wasn’t established to create a world of blind people gumming their food. It was to put a boundary on revenge, it was to give some order to fight and flight, it was to establish the *rules* for who had the right to strike who on which cheek, who had the right to take how much of who’s clothing, of who could detain who for how long. All very precise, all very sophisticated, all very... civilized. The Law defines limits on how we treat each other, on how much we owe each other, on how we are related to each other.

But Jesus... Jesus looked at things a little... differently. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Do you remember? “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,” Jesus said, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Do you remember? “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’” Jesus said, “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you are already liable to judgment.” Do you remember? “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek,” Jesus said, “turn the other also.” Do you remember?

It is sure that in creation, at least creation as we know it, it is “fight or flight.” It is sure that in civilized humanity, at least civilized humanity as we know it, the law is “an eye for an eye,” “tit for tat,” “quid pro quo.” It is equally sure that in the Kingdom of Heaven the standard is love. Love for our family, love for our friend, love for our neighbor. The standard is love. Love for the stranger, love for the outsiders, *love*, Jesus said, even for our enemy.

Oh, let’s be clear, it isn’t *easy* living that way. If you turn the other cheek, both cheeks are likely to get beat up pretty badly. If you give your cloak to the fella that takes your coat, you’ll probably end up pretty close to naked. If you keep going the extra mile, and *keep* going the extra mile, and *keep* going the extra mile, doubtless you’ll begin to wonder if you’ll *ever* reach home again. Sometimes lies and half-truths cut you deeper than legitimate criticism. Sometimes it’s hard to do the work you’ve been given to do clothed only in shredded remnants. Sometimes your feet just get sore from all the extra miling. But sometimes that’s precisely the love it takes, to begin to see strangers as neighbors, to see enemies as friends, to *begin* to see... as the *Father* sees.

There was a man who was struck on the right cheek, who was struck on the left, who nevertheless prayed for his persecutors. There was a man who was stripped of his outer garments, whose inner garments were divided as gamblers’ spoil, who nevertheless loved his enemies. There was a man who was taken one mile to the crown of the hill of execution, who went the second mile to a borrowed grave, who went an extra mile back from that grave, to show that us *all* that that love has *no* limit.