

“Belonging in the World: Worldchanging 101”

Matthew 5:38-48

February 2, 2020

Thanks to the generosity of the Lilly Endowment, the summer after my college graduation I had the opportunity to spend a week on Iona, a peaceful and sacred island off the coast of Scotland. It was a pilgrimage that also provided a pivotal moment on my vocational journey. I was in the midst of discerning what God was calling me to do with my life, and I was convinced that God would reveal those plans to me on this trip. That’s a lot of pressure to put on God! We spent the first two days in the city of Edinburgh, and it was there that I first thought God might be sending me a signal. I was walking through the city when I noticed a Franciscan monk, dressed in the long brown hooded robe, ahead of me. As the monk approached a homeless man on the sidewalk, he paused. With mindful attention, the monk reached down, shook the man’s hand, spoke to him, and offered him some coins. Finally, the monk crouched down next to the man and sat with him. Watching the gentle compassion of the monk, I decided this was the life for me. God had spoken. I would join a monastery. I would be uninhibited by the concerns of the material world, free to give my time and money to anyone who was in need while being supported by an intentional community of faith. I would live a life of total devotion—a life detached from the messiness of worldly affairs.

I remember thinking, what better place to begin my monastic life than Iona? But then, I spent a week there, worshipping with pilgrims from around the world and my own discernment group. That week I discovered a Gospel truth that I have been wrestling with ever since. Somehow, dedicating our lives to God does not release us from reality. Rather, it casts us into the beauty and brokenness that is life in this world.

Followers of Christ belong *in* the world. The

core of our faith is the story of a God who is not satisfied to remain otherworldly, but who becomes *Emmanuel*, incarnate in the life on this planet. In Christ, God moved into this world with a message of transformation in word and deed.

This month, we’ll explore our God-given call to engage the world beyond the sacred security of sanctuary. This morning’s gospel passage gives us a sense of how difficult that call can be. The reading from Matthew contains perhaps the most challenging set of ethical instructions in all of Scripture. As if it was not enough to require his followers to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give to everyone who asks, Jesus closes this succinct statement of ethical standards with this gem, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

We may be tempted, as many interpreters of this passage have been, to read these difficult commands as intentional hyperboles meant to provide not literal instruction, but metaphorical guidelines. As ideologues of both extremes have been eager to do, we may want to dismiss the commands as weak submission. Such reactions may give comfort to those of us who feel inadequate to meet the high standards presented, but they don’t account for the seriousness and repetition of these standards.

Earlier in this very chapter, Jesus speaks this command, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” No matter how much we try to temper, weaken, or reinterpret these commands, we cannot avoid the centrality of them in Matthew’s gospel. It is far better, I think, to take Jesus at his word.

So what does it mean to be perfect as God is perfect? It might help us to consider the Greek origin

of the term, “perfect”. Bear with me here, as I do what I tell other preachers not to do. The word used for “perfect” is *telos*, and it appears in some interesting places in the New Testament. Paul used it over and over again to describe Christians who have become mature in faith. Philippians 3:15 states, “Let those of us then who are *telos* [mature] be of the same mind [...]” I think, here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his followers to a grown-up way of faithful living. And the force of these commands is to ground our ethic, not in the merit of those with whom we relate, but, in the holiness of God. Jesus’ words are a summons to a different kind of life. More than that—his words constitute a call to resist the ethic of retaliation and vengeance that feeds a cycle of anger, fear, and hatred. The writer Marilynne Robinson, who always has the right words, puts it this way, “Love is holy because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters.”

Whatever else we may say about faith that can change the world, we must begin with this: world-changing must begin with a deep awareness of God’s unconditional and universal love. Without that, we will never sustain this radical way of life.

After all, the actions Jesus commands his disciples to take are, to say the least, counterintuitive. I remember teaching this text in a Bible study years ago. After listening patiently as long as he could, a member voiced his frustration: “This is ridiculous. I mean, I get it. He’s Jesus and he has to say these things. But we aren’t Jesus. We live in the real world.”

Of course, Jesus lived and died in the real world. I wonder if his words are meant to highlight the madness of what we’ve come to call normal. Normalcy has become violence, hatred, the disregard of the needs of others, and the willful ignorance about the impact of our action or inaction. I wonder if Jesus intends to expose the madness of a world obsessed with power and force, where we allow enemies and bullies to control us by hating them and striking back. We may not be called to perfection, but we are certainly called to persistent peculiarity. We are called

to be in the world without allowing the world to define the terms of our living.

Jesus calls us to enemy love, strength through service, and gaining by giving. It is peculiar indeed and driven by something deeper and more significant than personal gain, political influence, or material success. We are called to be peculiar people—like that man walking down a busy city sidewalk dressed in a long, brown robe and hood. We are called to be peculiar people who owe complete allegiance to the God who gave them life and the Lord who called them to love. It’s a different way of seeing the world. It’s a different way of living in the world.

We followers of Jesus have the awesome responsibility of demonstrating, in our individual and communal life, the reality of God’s kingdom. We are not permitted to allow ourselves to be held captive to the orders of this world. In our resistance, we bear witness to God’s transforming power. We refuse to give up on this broken world because we trust that God has not given up on us. We persist because God persists.

My sisters and brothers, now is no time for us to abandon the central call of the Gospel in favor of the short-lived satisfaction of striking back or lashing out. The world around us is begging us to be the church of Jesus Christ, and God has placed within us the grace to meet this moment with faithful resolve.

I’ve been thinking a lot these days about Reinhold Niebuhr. In the early and mid-20th century, Professor Niebuhr crafted a new theology which he called, “Christian Realism.” Against the backdrop of the Great Depression; the rise of Nazism and the Third Reich; the Second World War; and Soviet communism, Niebuhr grew from a crusading idealist to a hard-nosed pragmatist. In that time he also gained recognition as the most influential religious thinker in our nation.

In one of his most powerful declarations, Niebuhr spoke these words to the World Assembly of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948: “Perhaps our generation will fail. Perhaps we lack the humility

and charity for the task. There are ominous signs of our possible and even probable failure. There is the promise of a new life for people and nations in the gospel, but there is no guarantee of historic success. There is no way of transmuting the Christian gospel into a system of historic optimism. The final victory over human disorder is God's and not ours, but we do have responsibility for proximate victories. Christian life without a high sense of responsibility for the health of our communities, our nations, and our cultures degenerates into an intolerable other-worldliness. We can neither denounce this earthly home of ours nor yet claim that its victories and defeats give the final meaning of our existence.”

We cannot, and we must not denounce this earthly home. We can, and we must live out God's love in this world. In a few moments, we will hear reports on the life and ministry of this congregation. I pray that you will sense in those reports the hope that pervades our life together these days. The truth is I thank God that our time is now. Now is the time to witness to a deeper truth than the lies that whisper the demise of faith and the ultimate power of polarization and revenge. Now is the time to discover the truth of a love rooted in the holiness of God. Now is the time to recommit ourselves to resisting the madness of the world through the peculiar power of the Gospel.

May we all pray for the courage to be so peculiar that the world might take notice. Amen.