

Sermon for February 23, 2014

When we read through and listen to today's passage there are a couple of reactions that we might have. The first reaction is that we've heard these commands of Jesus so often that they don't even register. We hear the words and we think, "Yeah, turning the other cheek, loving your enemies really sounds nice" but that's all the farther it goes.

The other reaction is from taking Jesus' commands seriously, but we assume that they are out of reach so we think, "Turn the other cheek, don't fight back, love and pray for our enemies—are you kidding?!" and then to top it off Jesus ends with telling us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.

These and the other commands we have heard in the last few weeks seem to us to be really hard to do, especially this last command—to be perfect. When we hear the words to be perfect we think in moral terms—doing everything right just as God does everything right. But if we were to look closer at the original language we'd see that the word translated here as perfect has more of a sense of becoming what was intended, living into what purpose God has given. Take for example a fruit tree. When that tree has become perfect it will bear fruit—the purpose for which God intended. In fact Eugene Peterson captures that intent better in his Bible translation, *The Message*, when he states, "You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity."

But thinking this way doesn't get us off the hook. It does help us to get to the root of the matter. Which is that we can't do all of these things that Jesus is telling us to do—not violently retaliating, praying and forgiving those who hurt us—

except as those who are God's blessed and beloved children. If we haven't experienced love, if we don't know what it is, then we can't share it with others; which is why it's so important that it's Jesus saying these things to us. Jesus not only talked about love—his life embodied what love is all about. He walked to Jerusalem and endured the shame and suffering on the cross; dying so that we might know, trust and experience just how much God loves us.

Jesus understands just how hard it is for us to love rather than to hate, to forgive rather than to hold a grudge, to share with others rather than to hoard for ourselves, to heal rather than to wound; especially when in our lives we are wounded and hurt. Our grudges and hurts still haunt us; they take a long time to heal and are slow to fade.

I want you to close your eyes right now and think about one thing that keeps you from being the person God has created you to be. What one hurt or resentment or fear or memory is holding you back? With your bulletin today you should have received a blank piece of paper. I want you to tear that paper in half. On one side I want you to write down that one thing that is holding you back, fold it up and place it in the offering plate later. No one will read what you've written, but I will gather them together and burn them; releasing your hurt to God. On the other half of the paper I want you to write "I am God's beloved child." Keep this piece with you throughout the week and when it's difficult to be what God has called you to be; pull it out and look at it—reminding yourself that you are loved with a love greater and more powerful than anything else in this world! We are

kingdom people, blessed and beloved by God and called to be salt and light in the world. Now go and be who God has called you to be!