**February 23, 2014 – 7th Sunday after Epiphany**

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“If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

In a chapter full of tall orders, the commands in this last section are surely the tallest. Especially that last one – be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. How on earth are we supposed to pull that off?

Before I talk about anything else, I need to unpack that last sentence a bit. First of all, in spite of the translation we use, the sentence is not in the imperative. Jesus is not demanding that we be perfect. The verb is in the future – it might be more correctly translated as, “Therefore, you WILL be perfect, as the Father is perfect. Jesus is telling the disciples if they behave in the manner he has laid out not just in this section, but in the entire sermon on the mount, that being perfect will be the result.

And that word, “perfect” is also a little misleading. We think of perfect as being, well, perfect. Without flaws or faults. But the word is “*teleios*.” It comes from the word “*telos*” which means “goal” or “completion.” At Jesus’ crucifixion in the Gospel of John, when he says, “It is finished,” the word for finished comes from that same root word “*telos*.”

So what Jesus is telling us is that we will be complete, as the Father is complete. Or another way of putting it is that we will be mature in our faith. It’s still a huge concept, but it’s not one that we have to accomplish on our own, but rather it’s the end result or the goal of all that Jesus is teaching us in this chapter of Matthew.

This past week, several of the clergy from around the Diocese went on retreat together for community building and spiritual renewal. The retreat was led by the retired bishop of New Jersey, George Councell. He spoke a lot to us about God’s love for us and about how we often times have trouble accepting it.

We have trouble accepting it because we somehow feel we must earn it, but that restriction comes from us, not from God. Bishop Councell shared quotations from several books on this topic, and I’d like to pass on a few to you.

The first is from a book called *God First Loved Us* by Antony Campbell:

*How radically is our image of God reshaped if we take seriously the belief in God as deeply, passionately, and unconditionally loving us? How radically must we rework our own self-image if we accept ourselves as loveable – as deeply, passionately, and unconditionally loved by God?*

This is part of a longer quotation from another book, *The Furious Longing of God*, by Brennan Manning, who responded by saying:

*Two important corollaries flow from this life-changing revolution. First, if we continue to picture God as a small-minded bookkeeper, [as] a niggling customs officer rifling through our moral suitcase, as a policemen with a club who is going to bat us over the head every time we stumble and fall, or as a whimsical, capricious, and cantankerous thief who delights in raining on our parade and stealing our joy, we flatly deny what John writes in his first letter (4:16) – “God is love.” In human beings, love is a quality, a high-prized virtue; in God, love is His identity.*

*Secondly, if we continue to view ourselves as moral lepers and spiritual failures, if our lives are shadowed by low self-esteem, shame, remorse, unhealthy guilt, and self-hatred, we reject the teaching of Jesus and cling to our negative self-image.*

One quotation that hit me particularly hard, was from St. Augustine:

*In loving me, you made me lovable.*

And a final one, from the Jesuit priest, Anthony DeMello:

*Behold God beholding you…and smiling.*

We talked a lot about understanding what it means to be loved by God, and how hard it is to feel worthy of that love. But the truth is, no one is worthy of God’s love. No one is worthy of any kind of love, because love isn’t something that can be earned. Love is something that is given and accepted, without price or effort.

So let’s get back to today’s Gospel. These radical and crazy responses that Jesus is telling us to do, rather than the logical ones we would like to do? This is what we would do if we accepted that we are truly loved by God, and if we then loved each other the way God loves us.

If someone attacks you, show him that even if he attacks you a second time you will respond in love, not anger. If someone asks you for money or to borrow something, show him that you love him without judgment by giving him what you can without demanding an accounting of what it’s going to be spent on. If you are picked on or bullied, pray for your persecutors that they, too, might know the same love that you do.

Jesus isn’t telling us to be doormats or passive aggressive. He’s telling us to love each other as God loves us, or as Antony Campbell put it, deeply, passionately, and unconditionally. But we can only do this if we completely and without reserve, accept that same love that God has for us. That’s our source.

This acceptance requires work. It requires practice. Our society is not structured around loving each other, sadly. It’s structured around competition and scarcity and every man for himself. So every day – maybe even every hour – we need to tell ourselves that God loves us completely, without reserve and without limit and, because of this, we can afford to completely love our neighbor. We lose nothing and we gain everything. The more often we tell ourselves this, the more we will trust it and the more we will organize all of our actions around the simple truth that God loves us beyond reason.

It’s not easy, this acceptance of God’s freely given gift of love. We fight it. We want to do something to earn it or be worthy of it. But until we can finally simply rest in God’s love for us, we can’t abandon ourselves wholeheartedly into God’s service. And it’s only by doing that that we will be truly complete – or perfect as God is perfect.

I’d like to close with a prayer that Bishop Councell offered at the very beginning of the retreat, and which we returned to several times while we were together. It’s called the Prayer of Abandonment, and was written around the turn of the last century by an Algerian priest named Charles de Foucauld. It’s a very eloquent response of someone who completely accepts the love that God offers, and shapes his life around that governing principle:

*Father,*

*I abandon myself into your hands.*

*Do with me what you will.*

*Whatever you may do, I thank you.*

*I am ready for all, I accept all.*

*Let only your will be done in me*

*and in all your creatures.*

*I wish no more than this, O Lord.*

*Into your hands I commend my soul.*

*I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,*

*for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,*

*to surrender myself into your hands*

*without reserve and with boundless confidence,*

*for you are my Father.*

Amen.