

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
February 19, 2017
Matthew 5:38-48
“Not by Right but by Love”

“It’s my right!”

That’s a common phrase in our nation today, and it’s true: we live in a land where we are guaranteed certain rights as mentioned in the Declaration of Independence and stipulated by the United States Constitution—among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as well as free speech, arms-bearing and much more. These rights are blessings to be sure, and we do give thanks to God for them and do well to see that these rights are preserved. At the same time though, we must acknowledge that rights and blessings have a way of being abused by sinful people.

Sinful people are, by nature, selfish people. They see rights as things they naturally deserve, and that list will only grow. But more than that, sinners will view their rights as the right to look out for themselves at the expense of ignoring others who are in need.

So, as both Christians and American citizens, we want to be careful and we want to be clear. According to Scripture—according to God’s Law, you do not have a right to life, liberty or the pursuit of happiness. According to God’s Law, you deserve death and misery for your enslavement to sin: you do not have any rights. According to God’s Gospel, you do not have a right to life, liberty or the pursuit of happiness either: these things are not rights, but gifts and blessings. If you were to have these as rights from God, you would have to say, “I have a right to be redeemed! I deserve to have Jesus die for me!” But that is not the case: your redemption is solely by the grace and mercy of God. It’s a very dangerous thing to your faith if you think you’re entitled to any of God’s many blessings for you.

Does this mean, then, that we disparage the rights we have as citizens of this nation? Not at all! Rather, we appreciate them even more, for we recognize how truly undeserved they are. And recognizing that they are undeserved gifts, we want to preserve them and make use of them—not in service to ourselves, but in service to others: to rich and poor, to wealthy and needy, to unborn and elderly, and to generations to come. How to do so in a sinful world with limited resources will be an ongoing challenge, a source of disagreement and strife; that is why we want to be diligent citizens, and that is why we want to pray for those who have been elected to offices in our nation.

As Christians, though, we always know this: those rights we don’t have a right to are gifts, blessings of God to be used in service and love. So how will you live your life—by your rights...or by love?

It’s easy to say “I will live my life by love,” but it’s not so easy to do. Take, for instance, Jesus’ words about retribution: “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’”

But I say to you, 'Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well' (Matthew 5:38-40). "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." You'll find that in Exodus 21 and Leviticus 24 when it speaks of punishment for crime by authorities. But the purpose of the text is to limit the punishment so that it fits the crime: in other words, "An eye for an eye, not two eyes for an eye." While describing retribution, it also put limits on it. By the time of Jesus, though, this had been turned into a code for personal revenge: "If someone hurts me, I've got the right to hurt them back—and we're not even until I'm one up!"

To which Jesus says that unless you have the office of punishing crime for the common good, you don't have a right to punish. Personal revenge is not for you. If someone does evil, how are you to respond—according to your rights, or according to love? Punishment of evildoers is appropriate, but that's for the authorities to do. That's why we pray for them. You, on the other hand, are to live by love, not by your rights. Therefore, if someone does evil, forgive him and pray for him. If someone slaps you on the cheek, turn the other cheek—as opposed to saying, "I've got a right to slap back." If someone sues you and takes your tunic, says Jesus, let him have your cloak as well—as opposed to counter-suing in order to inflict harm back.

That may sound crazy to you, but remember: you're set free from sin to live by love, not by your rights. That doesn't mean that you cooperate with evil, but that you are first concerned about the eternal welfare of the evildoer, not personal revenge. To forgive and to serve the one who strikes at you may well be heaping hot coals upon his head that causes him to repent of his sin and be forgiven. More personally, desire for revenge will destroy your faith: you cannot wish harm on others while believing that you have a right to God's love but they do not.

Likewise, Jesus says, "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matthew 5:41). That one would annoy Jesus' hearers. Roman law said that a Roman soldier had the right to compel anyone to carry his pack for one mile—a law that the Jews bitterly resented. Instead of saying the popular thing— "You've got a right to be treated better!" Jesus says, "Carry the pack an additional mile. You don't live by your rights. You live by love." Now, chances are that you're not going to be waylaid by a Roman soldier when you leave church today. But when someone asks you for help that you don't want to give, or when the government asks for more taxes than you want to pay, or when your country asks you to do more than you are willing to do—what right do you have to say no? As a Christian, you don't live by rights. You don't live by what you like, either. You live by love.

Again, says Jesus: "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42). You and I are naturally very much into, "Live and let live—I'll look out for me, you look out for you. You are not my problem—you are your problem." In other words, "I've got a right to what's mine." But you don't live by rights. You live by love—and God gives you what you have to use in service to others.

So, thus far: Don't live by your rights, but live by love. Don't strike back, don't seek revenge. If someone takes, give more. If someone begs, don't refuse. This is what Jesus says—this is the

Word of the Lord. Examine yourself and how you live, and that ought to be enough law to show you that you need forgiveness. But just in case it isn't, allow me to frustrate you and your good intentions even more. If you are called upon to do more in service to your country and you do so out of love, that means you have less time to act in service to family: so living by love in one area hurts living by love in another. Or let's talk about those who beg: there are those who are truly in need, and it is good to help them. There will also be those who are lying through their teeth, and helping them will only encourage them in their sin: so as you attempt to live in love, how do you know if you're actually helping or contributing to evil...? Remember that you're sinful; and on top of that, you've got limited resources and energy, as well as a measly 24 hours a day to get things done. You're limited in all sorts of ways. Although the Law of God demands such actions, you're going to fail. Even if you want to succeed. Which you probably don't.

One more chunk of law for today: Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?'" (Matthew 5:43-47).

You've got a right to choose who to help, right? Jesus says "No." It's easy to help a friendly neighbor, especially since there's an excellent chance that he's going to help you back when you need it. Jesus says that you're to love your enemies, too. Pray for them, even when they persecute you. This, He says, is living by love. Loving friends and neighbors is no big deal—everybody does that. But loving your enemies, says Jesus, indicates that you're sons of your Father in heaven. Loving people who love you is no sign of being a Christian. Tax collectors do that. Gentiles do that. Prostitutes do that. Drug dealers do that. Terrorists even love those who love them.

To live truly by love, though, is to love your enemies. Do that perfectly, and you're perfect. This isn't a goal to aspire to, it's a requirement: Jesus says, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). To do any less than this is to be imperfect. To be imperfect is to be unholy, and to be unholy is to face eternity in hell for your sin.

You don't have a right to eternal life. On your own, you don't even have a chance of eternal life.

This text, like so much of the Sermon on the Mount, is full of Law—accusing Law that condemns you by exposing your sin. Yet as Jesus lays down the Law in this passage, the words He uses keep pointing you to the Gospel. Dear friends, there is hope and life for you. Not in your rights, but in grace. Not in you, but in Christ.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." This law means that if you don't hurt anybody, nobody should be hurting you either. But there is Christ in the Praetorium, beaten and bloodied. Does He have a right to life? Does He have the right to be treated better? Absolutely!

He's the Son of God. He's the King of kings! He deserves all glory, honor and worship. But He is not there to enforce His rights. He is there acting in love for you.

He is slapped on the cheek...no He's struck, hit hard. They mock Him for being the King and the Christ! Justice would have Him speak a Word of righteous anger and kill His enemies on the spot. But He turns the other cheek instead, because He is going to bear the burden of your sin to the cross. He is living, and suffering, according to love for you—that you might be redeemed.

He's not compelled to carry a soldier's pack for a mile. He's forced to carry His own cross as far as He can manage. For you. They take His tunic. How obscene: they cast lots to see who gets to take it home even when He's right there, bleeding and dying on the cross. What is the thing to do by right? Put an end to this injustice, come down from the cross and get rid of sinful man. But what does the Savior do? He doesn't take His tunic back, nor does He demand theirs. He gives more than His cloak: He gives His blood. He wants them clothed in His robe of righteousness. You, too. He is living, and dying, by love for you. He prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The penitent thief on the cross is a beggar: he's got nothing to offer the Savior. But still, by faith he says, "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Jesus doesn't say, "I'll look after Me—you look after you." He gives. He gives life: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," says Jesus in our text, "so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." The only-begotten Son of the Father in heaven is on the cross out of love for His enemies—for while we were yet sinners and enemies, Christ died for us. He has a right to far better than crucifixion, but He perfectly sets aside what He deserves in order to save you from what you've got coming.

And so you are set free from sin, and this is what sets you free to love others. You didn't have a right to the absolution this morning. Jesus didn't say, "Because you've done so well, I forgive you all of your sins." No, you're a beggar—you've got nothing to offer Jesus in order to earn His favor. He simply said, "I forgive you." His doing, His gift, His love for you.

You don't have a right to the Holy Communion: anybody who insists they have a right to the Supper has automatically disqualified himself until he repents. The Supper is not a right or a reward for those who have been loving enough to come into God's presence: it is Jesus coming with undeserved forgiveness for you. And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

You don't have a right to God's love: at first, that sounds like a bad thing. But if it's a right, then you will spend your life insisting that the right is yours—and thus denying your sin. You'll spend your life believing that you must work hard to maintain that right, that you earn it and keep it by your love—thus denying that His grace is a gift for you.

The news is far better than that! God gives you salvation solely by His grace, solely for the sake of Jesus. You're set free from living by your rights, and you're set free to live by love—not your love, but the love that Christ has for you. This will have a huge impact on your love for others. You're no longer an enemy or a beggar: by the grace of Christ, you're a holy child of God, promised an eternity in His household, His kingdom. This is all yours by His love for you, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen