

Matthew 5.38-48

“A Fresh Ripe Peach”

The other day my brother and I met with a young man to discuss some things about my mother’s care. When the man arrived at the door of my mom’s home it was obvious that he was under some stress. Being the caring pastoral type, I asked him if he was okay. Normally, in situations like that most of us would say, “No, no, everything is fine.” After all, my brother and I were complete strangers.

The man decided, however, to share with us his dilemma. He had just received a phone call from the school requesting that he come and meet with his son’s teacher and the school principal. Who knew that even as an adult one gets nervous about being called into the principal’s office.

The man’s nine-year-old son, who was normally a very shy, quiet and respectful child had been in a fight at school. The school was threatening to suspend the student because it appeared that he had

initiated the fight. Dad, like any good parent, was understandably upset.

The father went on to say that he wondered about whether his son was being bullied in school and that this fight may have been a response to that reality. His son was a little smaller than most of the boys in his class and he wasn't into sports. Dad mused that perhaps this fight was a good thing. Maybe it might toughen his son up a little. Sometimes you have to throw the first punch to show the bully who is in charge. Sometime violence is justifiable.

My brother and I did not know how to respond. We were both bullied as kids in school. We were both short kids with obvious quirks which made us acceptable targets for bullying. My brother responded by becoming an athlete. I responded by going inward.

I do remember one day deciding that I had enough of being picked on by the older kids. So, at recess I found someone smaller than me, who also happened to be a friend. His name was Steven. I went up

to him and punched him in the stomach as hard as I could. I was probably seven or eight years old at the time. He doubled over and burst into tears. I immediately felt awful. That moment has stayed with throughout my life. My act of violence did not stop the bullying. If anything, it only intensified the bullying. I continued to be bullied til I finally left high school. I learned an important lesson that day; violence only creates more violence. A couple of summers ago, I was in a coffee shop with my mom in my home town of Beamsville and we ran into Steven's dad. He was a business associate of my father's. I again felt my guilt about what I did that day. I asked about his son. Steven was doing fine. He had moved on, but that day still troubled me.

This all came back to me as I read these words from our gospel reading today from Matthew chapter five: "You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." I have often wondered what I would have done if

Steven had got up and said; “Hit me again.” I have also wondered whether Jesus had ever been bullied in school?

Turning the other cheek is a hard thing to do whether you are a nine-year old boy on a school play ground or an octogenarian living in a retirement home. Retaliation comes much easier. We are genetically programmed to protect ourselves.

In our passage, today, Jesus goes on to encourage his followers to do several difficult things. Each of these invitations by Jesus goes against our basic instinct for self-preservation. Jesus suggests that if someone wants to sue you, let them. If someone wants your coat, give them your cloak. If someone begs you for money, give it to them. Uncertainly, Jesus did not really mean that, did he? What if they use my money to buy drugs?

Jesus goes on to say that we should even love our enemies. He concludes by saying; “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” This seems like crazy talk. It reminds us once again that

following Jesus is not easy. This kingdom that Jesus is building is an upside-down kingdom.

We minister types are sometimes guilty of keeping the message too light. We like to talk about God's love. We don't like to offend by being too demanding. We like to keep it warm and fuzzy. Sometimes we are content to offer helping after helping of bunnies and chocolate covered Easter eggs. Jesus did not. Jesus was not afraid to call his followers to higher standard of living. He was not afraid to invite his followers to do the hard work of becoming all that they were created and gifted by God to be.

Is it even possible to love our enemies? Is it possible to stand up to a bully without using violence? Is it possible to give to everyone who asks? Is it possible to create a world where every one has a warm place to sleep and enough food to eat? Is it possible to be perfect as God perfect? Is it possible to be holy as God is holy? If it is not possible, then why try.

What does Jesus really mean when he says; “be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect?” What did God mean when God said through Moses; “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy?”

We often confuse holiness with following a set of rules and regulations; “Don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t go with girls that do.” Holiness is more than just following right rules it is about having a right heart. To be holy as God is holy is to have a heart that beats with the same passion as God’s heart. From that passage in Leviticus we discover that God has a heart of compassion for the poor. Therefore, God’s people are called to have a heart for the poor. God has a forgiving and generous heart. Therefore, we are called to have a forgiving and generous heart. God has a heart that beats for justice and integrity and so should God’s people.

In our passage from Matthew the term translated as perfect can also be translated as whole or ripe as in a fresh ripe tomato. I like that image it compliments the garden image we talked about last year.

I grew up in the fruit belt. One of my favourite fruits is the peach. For me, there is nothing more delicious on a warm August day than biting into a fresh ripe peach. To be perfect then is to be like a fresh ripe peach which means being exactly what we are created, called and gifted to be. I invite each us to consider that the journey of our lives is about ripening into the person God intended us to be.

One of the things I learned from growing up in the fruit belt was that fresh ripe peaches don't just happen. They take a lot of time, hard work and God's generous gift of sunlight and rain not to mention temperate winters and good soil. I think there is an important lesson to remember in that. To become the fresh ripe peach that God has called and gifted us to be takes a lot of hard work and time and the generous gift of God's grace.

Following Jesus is not easy. We don't learn to turn the other cheek or forgive our enemies over night. It takes a lot of small choices over a long time. As one of my favourite spiritual writers, Eugene

Peterson, puts it; “a long obedience in the same direction.” It is also takes a generous portion of trusting in the abundance of God’s grace that fuels our steps and works its slow transformation like the warm sunlight ripening the peach. The journey towards perfection or ripeness takes a life time of one step forward and a few steps back.

Something I have discovered on the journey of my ripening is that learning to love our enemy often begins at home. We cannot forgive others until we have learned to forgive ourselves. Until we make peace with our own inner enemy we can not make peace with any enemy outside us. Often the person we call our enemy is someone that touches something inside of us that we cannot accept or forgive. And we cannot completely find forgiveness in God’s grace until we find our way to forgive those who have hurt us.

Following Jesus is not easy. It is a long obedience in the same direction. May God give us the grace to make one more step forward today in the journey toward our ripening. **Amen.**