

# Marion weekly update

JUNE 12, 2022

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**SERMON** June 5, Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:38-48

We continue our series this week on the Sermon on the Mount. As we do, I'd like to point something out. It's a pattern that's developed and we'll see how it holds as we continue on through the coming weeks.

To this point what we see is that Jesus frames His points in complimentary doubles. Murder and Adultery are very different actions. Yet the way He addresses them makes a complimentary point that the action is the product of a heart that has become darkened only restrains the behavior out of a lack of courage or opportunity.

Divorce and oaths compliment one another as we see how vows of marriage are tied to divorce in regards to breach of covenant.

Here we see the famous "eye for an eye" matched with love of enemy. We'll see very clearly how these two are joined and compliment one another.

First comes the eye for an eye passage with the "you've heard it said". In ancient culture this was considered justice. Whatever one person inflicts on another that is wrong or criminal, the same is offered in return. It's a basic "tit for tat". This understanding was not limited to the Hebrews but to surrounding cultures as well. The concept was actually considered "retributive justice". The idea was that if the punishment matched the crime, then all was made equal. Therefore there was less chance that the offended party would feel the need to retaliate further.

But there is a problem with this.

If what was done to me is wrong, then it is wrong for me to inflict the same on another. The idea that wrong is right if it was first done to me is a childish one. Wrong is wrong, regardless of what I've endured. The moment we begin to justify wrongdoing out of our own pain is the moment we begin to justify sin.

We see the impact of this retributive justice in many places. Human nature has difficulty distinguishing between this and vengeance. Not to mention that whether the retribution is equal may be a rather subjective matter. Working with gangs in Pittsburgh in the mid 90s this was laid bare in its problematic nature. One gang would commit an offense. The offended gang would take their pound of flesh in retribution. Which would in turn spark a response, then a response, then a response. This came home for me harshly when a 15 year old boy on my caseload was shot and killed in one such altercation one night in the middle of the week.

It's not limited to gangs. We see it with adults all the time. "I'll treat you the way you treat me." "Be nice to me and I'll be nice to you." We see it in politics. One party behaves in bad faith. When the tables of power turn the offended party does the same thing, because after all if it was okay for the other it must be okay for them. Adults, in leadership behaving like petulant children.

This thinking never brings about the result desired. It may for a time but over the long haul it is corrosive. Think about the gun violence in our country that's been occurring all year, it seems every year. So frequently the perpetrator is noted to have been mistreated and perhaps they were getting back at those, or just the world, that has done the mistreating. How often does the person inflicting the violence then turn the violence on themselves and take their own life? If this retribution, this vengeance, truly was healing, this wouldn't be the case.

No, to give in to a retributive, vengeful spirit only drives us deeper into darkness. Sadly sometimes irretrievably so.

Jesus goes even so far as to tell us to allow ourselves to give in to unfair pressure. He instructs us to not only take the insult or demand, but to double down and go even further than requested. Does He expect us to be doormats?

No. He expects us to be smart.

There are plenty of times when Jesus demonstrates the need to stand up for ourselves. He does it shrewdly, but He does

stand up for Himself. In doing so He befuddles his accusers. Nevertheless, He doesn't simply lie down for them. So it's not about being a doormat.

Given the context of His time, it is about both heart and common sense. Heart we'll get to in a moment with the second half of this duo of notions. But common sense is evident here.

Jesus is speaking to Jews. They are at best second class citizens, and certainly the butt of jokes, and even persecutions of sorts. They are easy targets. In the past, when a few too many have had enough of the bullying, a revolt would spring up. The result was never good for the Jews. Hundreds and thousands were slaughtered. They simply didn't have the might to back up an ornery, retributive reaction to the bully in their midst. So what to do?

Go the opposite direction.

If someone is trying to make you look bad by bullying, double their request. Then perhaps your kindness will overshadow their harshness. If someone tries to make you do something by force, their power is removed if you are willing. Kindness confuses the predator. Kindness can even take their power away. Kindness demonstrates something unique in a world bent on always fighting back, even if there's no fight being sought after. In a world where far too many are itching for a confrontation and resistance so they can fight, those who respond in kindness and gentleness are anomalies.

To offer kindness over retribution displays an uncommon strength. That strength is attractive to many who are tired of aggression and hard hearts. The more that kindness is consistently demonstrated, the more our character shines and influences and inspires. Those who are looking for something different may perhaps see the real deal of it in us.

Jesus emphasizes His intent by His teaching on loving our enemies.

As we approach communion, nothing could be more appropriate to consider. Hanging on the cross, Jesus forgives those who put Him there. He refuses to return anger for anger, violence for violence, judgement for judgement. In every single circumstance He loves. Even when He's standing against those who stand against Him, it's in a spirit of love. Why does He refute them? Confuse them? It's out of love so that hopefully their eyes can be opened to who He truly is and come to believe in and follow Him.

There's nothing special about hating those who hate us. That's easy. It's common. Tragically it happens not just outside the church but inside as well. Loathing another is justified so that in someone's own mind they can stand right before God. But this passage puts the lie to this.

Hating another, seeking vengeance and retribution, is not what God has in mind for us. Rather God has in mind forgiveness, mercy, and grace. God has in mind that we act and do as God does. Just because someone makes a mistake, holds a different viewpoint, chooses a different path doesn't mean they are outside the grace of God, specifically if they believe in Jesus Christ.

All of us are misguided. Many of you have heard me say that everyone is someone else's heretic. God sees us as we are and our hearts as they are. Being perfect as God is perfect, at least in some sense, means extending compassion to those with whom we disagree, and even those who may consider us enemies to be tramped out.

As we move into Holy Communion I invite you to a few things. Search your heart to see if there is bitterness and judgement towards another. Take a moment to sift through it, and if you can, even if only for this moment, find forgiveness.

Find grace. Find mercy. Know that whatever has been in your heart that is out of step because of that bitterness is forgiven as we come before God, through Christ, and striving towards a better state of being and loving each other. Realize that releasing another from that bitterness also releases you. You become free to continue becoming all that God has in store for you.

A life of faith is never about retribution and vengeance. It's never about exacting a pound of flesh. We leave all of that to God and God alone. For us, we are called to live in the freedom of grace freely given to us, and called to freely offer that same grace to others. In this lies peace before God and one another.