

St. Luke's Episcopal Church
The Seventh Sunday After Epiphany
February 19, 2017
Matthew 5:38-48
The Reverend John P. Carr

The Perfection of God

There was a time long ago when violence reigned among mankind. This chaos was replaced with the beginning of the Law. The law of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” became the then modern way of settling differences with a judge rather than through continued violence and revenge.

Then Jesus arrived with a new way, a radical way. His way abolished revenge and updated the law. He replaced it with a radical new attitude. His new way required love.

It required that you;

- *love of your enemy,*
- *love of those* who had wronged you,
- love of those who had cheated you or stolen from you.
- It called for generosity instead of revenge,
- an open hand of friendship, instead of clenched fist of anger and hatred.

Thomas Cranmer captured the spirit of this radical new love that Jesus brought to the world in today's Collect.¹ He expressed it in stark language that left no room for equivocation. He wrote that if we are without love we are in effect dead. Without love what we do is worth nothing at all.

That is why in the Collect he also calls on God, through the Holy Spirit, to “*pour out His love,*” His greatest gift, into our hearts.

There was a song written in 1957 and most famously recorded in 1969 by Tom Jones.² The song was called “Without Love”. The theme of the song is almost a direct reflection of the Collect written by Cranmer in 1549. It is that without love we have nothing, nothing at all.

It is a very short song that goes like this. I did change the lyrics from love for a girl to a love for the Lord.

I awakened this morning, I was filled with despair
All my dreams turned to ashes and gone,
As I looked at my life it was barren and so bare
Without love I've had nothing at all.

I once had a savior
Who loved only me
There was nothing that he would not give.
I was blind to his goodness and I just could not see
That a heart without love cannot live.

Without Love I had nothing
Without Love I had nothing at all.
I had conquered the world
But what then did I have?
because Without Love, I had nothing, nothing at all.

The song is about lost love. With Jesus there is no lost love, only our refusal or our inability to accept and return His love.

This is a great truth, that without love, what we do is empty. Once we realize it and make it a part of our being, we are changed, we are transformed *if we accept the love of God and surrender our will to His loving will.*

When we find ourselves in a conversation with someone about faith, can we tell our story, can we tell the story of Jesus clearly and in a few words? The place to start is with the word **LOVE**. We can tell of the love of God for his people. He gave them some rules that we call commandments, not to hem them in but to protect and teach them in

the way of love. The beginning of the story of God's great love is with His people after He brought them out of Egypt.

It is recorded in Leviticus 19 that the Lord said, *"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."* God's desire was for us to be like him. He wanted to show how to be like him and instructed Moses to

- tell the people to share with the poor when those who owned the fields gathered their harvests.
- He called on the people not to steal whether through actual thievery or by bearing false witness, lying, fraud.
- He called on the people to be just in all their dealings with their neighbors and finally not to hate their kin or neighbor.

A summary of these laws is found in one word. That word is **LOVE**. And why are we to love? He said it, to be like Him, to *"be Holy because He is Holy."* The Lord directed Moses to tell the people to *"love your neighbor as yourself."*

We could simply pray for this wisdom, this guidance of the Lord, to be like Him but it is not that easy for us is it? We need more. We need to pray but we need to pray for particular things to enable us to better follow the commandments of God. We need to pray for God,

- *to teach us,*
- *give us understanding, to*
- *make us go the right way, to*
- *keep our hearts centered on Him, to*
- *turn away from unrighteousness and*
- *pray finally for the mercy of God to fulfill His promises to us.*

That would be a good start.

There is another way for us to be Holy. We need to realize that God is with us *“even to the end of the age”* as it is written in the last verse of the Gospel of Matthew. How we treat our “selves,” our persons, is a part of this being Holy. When the Temple was torn down in 70 AD, it did not matter because a new Temple of God had come. Jesus is the new Temple and He dwells in us making us a part of the new temple as well. How should we treat our temple? We should treat it as a holy place shouldn't we?

Jesus came as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses and the Prophets. He brought a new commandment from God. To love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. He is calling everyone to live a new way. When Jesus is revealing his radical new way based on love, He is calling for us to reflect our Heavenly Father. We are called to express the love of God through our thoughts, actions and how we treat our temple of God.

How would God have us respond? You might recall the saying, WWJD, *“What Would Jesus Do”* and that is a good thought. But go back a little bit and ask what would Jesus think?

What is in the heart of Jesus, in the moment?

What if someone hits or insults us?

- *Think of what Jesus thought at His trial.*

What if someone demands something of us?

- *Think of Jesus being stripped and beaten.*

What if someone pushes or requires us to go beyond what we would usually want to do?

- *Think of Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha.*

What if someone persecutes us?

- *Think of Jesus being nailed to the cross.*

What if someone begs from us?

- *Think of Jesus granting eternal life to the man on the cross next to him when he begged to be remembered.*

Jesus showed us the way to eternal life. He led by example in a very extreme and unmistakable way. He showed the Way when He lived the Gospel story. He showed us how to **LOVE** in all that He did.

He updated the message from God to Moses when He said,
“be PERFECT, therefore, as your heavenly Father is PERFECT.”

He is calling us to be like God, to conform our spirit, to His Spirit, and seek that place near to the heart of God, in the Perfection of His love.

This word “perfect” refers to *God’s expectation of us* to be completely blameless just like Him.

This great love is not a gradual thing. As the Collect expressed, we are to change our ways to His ways. He does not express that we will gradually or eventually reach God. He means now.

We can’t reach God by our efforts but by the grace of God expressed in His love. When we express our faith in acts of love, then we are conformed to the will of God and have become the hands of Christ in the world. That is the perfection we are to seek.

We are called to choose to return the love of God. With the love of God in our hearts, then we can express Christian charity, Christian love. With love as the key, the doors of action will be flung wide open to bring our faith to life before the Lord.

He is calling us to love God and to love our neighbor. When we follow Jesus, when we seek first the kingdom of God and respond to the world the way that Jesus would, then we are moving toward living that perfection that Jesus called us to.

If we don't, if I do it may way, like Frank Sinatra, we will find as the song said, "our dreams turned to ashes."

The way to life is through love, in all that we think, do and say.

Our way will not work but the way of God in the perfect love of Christ will work.

Without love, we have nothing at all. But when we live with the love of God filling our hearts, then we are nearing *the perfection of God* that Jesus called us live.

Amen

1. The Collect

O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

2. "Without Love" Tom Jones, 1969

Songwriters: BARRY MASON, LES REED

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