

7th Sunday Ordinary Time 2017

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'Like for like', 'tit for tat', 'quid pro quo', 'an eye for an eye', 'a tooth for a tooth'; retaliation, reciprocity, reprisal, *rivalry*.

Probably sums up our relationships quite well. Negotiations of mutual exchange like consumer goods in a trade war that judges one's life by net gain at another's deficit. And we want to *win*.

We live in a world in which some *need* to starve so that others might grow fat, where some *must* fight so that others have peace, where some must be enslaved that others might be free.

And Jesus has no interest in simply reforming this world of rivalry. He wants to reform us for an entirely new world.

'Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy', we hear in our reading from Leviticus. In other words, make manifest the life of God in the world, and do so, the text says, by forsaking hatred, by not exacting vengeance, not bearing a grudge; by loving your neighbour as yourself.

The laws in this passage are focussed on social and systemic justice and equality, on subverting earthly powers that suppress the weak and vulnerable: do not gather the whole of your harvest for yourself, but leave behind enough for the poor and the sojourner. Do not steal from one another, deal falsely with one another, or lie to one another, do not slander: find yourself outside the boundaries of our cycle of rivalry.

There is no viable way of being 'holy as God is holy' without this social transformation. This is not about a personal moral code. This is not about setting up a new form of exclusion or rivalry in which there is a set of God-fearing law abiders and another set of

wicked evildoers. A 'moral majority' contending for power or prestige or victory.

This is about spending our lives on the needs of others; about extending a love that yields no return.

When we come to Jesus, however, we see that the law could not go far enough to achieve this revolution of social relationships; this revolution of love.

A radical transformation of God's relations with humanity and human relations with one another is inaugurating in Jesus Christ, and in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus clarifies what this looks like, beginning with the Beatitudes:

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely'. The key to blessedness is a life that does not participate in the violent power struggles of the world: not, 'blessed are the victors who overpower others', but 'blessed are the meek'; not, 'blessed are

the mighty who win the battle', but 'blessed are the peacemakers'.

Things then become even more shocking: lust is the same as adultery, anger the same as murder, a quarrel with a brother or sister invalidates one's act of worship. Jesus is fixated on bringing us to freedom beyond being bound to others through rivalry, violence, and exclusion: turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give the shirt off your back. Move out of the cycle of reciprocal relationships bound by rivalry and move into free ones.

This is the key to the outrageous demand: 'Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect'.

In the first half of our passage in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus radicalises the legal system of retaliation and presents outrageous, seemingly ridiculous, reactions to injustice.

'You have learnt that it was said: eye for eye and tooth for tooth', but I say 'no resistance', give your aggressor the other side of your face as well. If you are sued for your shirt, offer your coat also; if ordered to go one mile, go two; do not deny the beggar.

The second half of the passage extends the love of neighbour in Leviticus to the love of one's enemy. Here, there is a specificity of love that removes all specificity. Love that specific person, there, your enemy, and by doing so you remove all boundaries so as to offer indiscriminate love to *all*.

This is not reasonable, it doesn't feel natural, it doesn't easily translate into political and social situations. But this is precisely the point. Jesus does not command it because it is reasonable or expedient—that we might gain something, participate in some sort of consumer transaction: I give a bit, and in return get something from you.

Jesus is teaching precisely against such a way of life: no tit for tat, no pure reciprocity, no eye for an eye.

'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'.

The heavenly Father is not looking for reciprocity, nothing can rival God. God's unconditional love for us is for our sake, not God's. God gains nothing from us—we have no adequate response to this love.

Jesus is telling us that we must love as the Father loves—without profit, without expedience, outside the circle of rivalry that always creates victims of the weak, which always excludes the outsider.

God is beyond rivalry, beyond competition, and therefore loves with complete *freedom*. Nothing can alter God's love. It is not dependant upon anything we have to offer; not bound by anything, completely free. To be perfect, or whole, or complete, as the Father, is to move beyond rivalry and into freedom.

We cannot help but to see Christ's own life, particularly the end of his life, as a playing out of this freedom of love. In his trial he is reviled and persecuted and false witness is given against him, but Jesus is silent (Matt 26.60-63). His cheek is struck (26.67). He gives up his cloak, so to speak, as the soldiers divide his garments among themselves (27.35).

But Jesus responds by loving through the hatred, forgiving through the ridicule, healing through his wounds. And so Jesus on the cross becomes a sign, a revelation, of the freedom of God's love.

Being perfect as the Father is perfect, joining in on God's perfect love, is to overturn the cycle of reciprocity, of violence and rivalry. So when governments and nations, out of hatred, or discrimination, or fear, turn away those who have seen their homes destroyed and their families ripped apart, we are on the side of the victim.

When immigrants are scapegoated for the multifaceted and intricate web of problems that face communities and nations, rather than received and accepted in a rejection of rivalry, we are on the side of the victim.

When we as the Church do not work tirelessly to include and embrace those who have been rejected or left outside the community—shame! This is the very self-righteous religious victim creation of those who condemned Jesus—those who could shout, 'crucify him!', with a completely clear conscience, feeling justified, righteous even, before God: Jesus was a blasphemer, remember! He got what was coming to him.

So we have to ask ourselves, who is it that we feel justified and righteous in excluding? Who is it we are willing to be rivals with? Who is it that we believe it is alright, maybe even holy and righteous, to make a victim?

'The Lord does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults'. God's love is free from all rivalry.

And, in Christ, so is ours. And it is at the cross that our love embraces this freedom. Being perfect as God is perfect doesn't mean we never get things wrong. It is a call to completeness, to become wholly, completely, and only love. We ourselves, as Christ, become a sign of God's perfect love. A sign of *freedom*.

We are freed from our need for rivalry, from competition, freed from the restraints of an 'eye for an eye' and 'tooth for a tooth', freed to follow Jesus to the cross. We are freed to take the side of the victim, of the outcast, of the marginalised to such an extent that we ourselves become vulnerable to victimhood, to defeat, to crucifixion. We are freed toward crucifixion.

No more give and take, just a love that gives. We are mirrors of God's freedom in the world: the freedom to be crucified.