

Sermon: **JUSTICE IS: VULNERABILITY**

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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 evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

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, for you are children of Go, who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 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 and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Let your love be perfect, therefore, as God's is perfect. — Matthew 5.38-48

Sometimes Jesus says comforting things and sometimes he says sort of challenging things. Today I would like for him to say something comforting.

We're going through a hard time. We're all going through a hard time. The whole world is going through a hard time, worried about terrorism and war and climate change. Our country is going through a hard time anxious about politics and immigrants and policies and conflicts.

We are going through a hard time in our own lives. We have struggles and losses and mysteries that weigh on us, that tug at us.

This Church is going through a hard time. Things are changing. The ground is shifting beneath us. New things are happening and we're not quite sure how to meet those new conditions. There have been some disturbing outbursts and arguments and questions in the church. There's some unease. And then we lose a brother, our buddy, our guy, Gary, out of the blue. There's just too much hard stuff.

And we want Jesus to say something more comforting than "turn the other cheek and love your enemies." I want something comforting. But you know what I think? I think those words *are* comforting.

When we're in the middle a hard time we just want God to make things better...but when we get on a little more on level ground we realize that that's not really what we want. If God always made everything better then nothing would ever happen. Nobody would be free. We'd get exactly what we deserved, which would mean it would be worse than it is now. There would be no surprises, no gifts. We don't really want that. What we really want is not a world without any valley of the shadow of death. What we want is to be able to say, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I am not afraid because you are with me."

What we really want is to know that God is with us. A lot of people live their whole lives well for that singular purpose: so they can die and go to heaven. And what is heaven but just being with God? It's what we most deeply want: a God who is with us, no matter what, in everything. And what Jesus shows us is a God who is with us in everything.

To onlookers it looked like Jesus was just causing trouble when he ate with sinners. I don't think that's what it looked like for the sinners. To onlookers it looked maybe bothersome, even maybe gross that Jesus spent all of his time reaching out and touching lepers. I don't think that's how it felt for the lepers.

Jesus showed us a God who is right there with us when we're suffering, when we're in pain, when we're going through a hard time—even when we're wrong. Jesus was showing us a God who loved us so much that when bad things happen to us it's God who will step in and turn the other cheek. Even when life takes from us more than we want to let go of, it's God who will step right alongside us and offer not only a cloak, but a coat as well. It's God who will walk that second mile with us, even when we don't get it. And when we act like we're not God's children, we act like strangers to God or even enemies of God, God loves us when we're enemies.

That's what the cross is all about. Some people have this sort of medieval catholic notion that the cross is a picture of God's punishment. But God didn't do that. We're the ones who crucify. The cross is a picture of God's willingness to suffer *with* us, to be with us no matter how bad it gets, to be right there, to turn God's cheek when we're the ones who are being struck, and to love us when we're the ones who are being the enemies. That's where Jesus lives, in those hurting places in our lives, bringing God close so that we know that we're not alone. However awful the loss, however confusing the challenge, there is God, whose love is perfect, pure, undiluted.

When Jesus says, "Love your enemies, and turn the other cheek," he's not asking us to do something that he hasn't done, that he isn't already doing, always doing. When he asks us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies and to give when so much is already being demanded of us, he's simply inviting us to be close to him, to be where he is.

We beg borrow and steal from God, and God turns around and gives us more than we've even asked for. That's Jesus saying, "Come be with me here in that place."

To an onlooker it might look like a burden, it might look like a difficult challenge to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to give to those who beg from us, to love our enemies. But to us who want God to be with us, it sounds like a blessing to be able to be right there where God is.

All through this Epiphany season we've been hearing about God's demand for justice. God has been saying over and over again that it's about relationships. It's not just about laws; it's about relationships of love. Jesus makes it clear that if we are to help him to establish justice in the world it's not going to be enough to pass some really good laws and write some very well directed checks. We will need to do those things, and also we will need to do what Jesus shows us how to do – to become vulnerable.

Derek read from Philippians how Christ, though equal to God, did not grasp at that, but became empty, born as a humble human, went through the worst of it with us. That's the path we have to take to establish justice.

Last night I went to a meeting at the Unitarian church up in Littleton where a young black man spoke about Black Lives Matter Boston, the Boston unit of that movement, a very articulate and wise young man. And he said, "I don't expect white people to heal racism. I want you to, but I don't expect you to. I know you want me to tell me what to do. I'm not going to tell you what to do. You know what to do. If it's your problem, you need to solve it. If you think it's my problem, that's the problem. Do what you need to do."

It was uncomfortable because you know I wanted him to just, you know, tell me what to do. But what he was doing was inviting us to be vulnerable with those who are already vulnerable.

If we're going to deal with white supremacy we have to be willing to give up our own white privilege and power. We have to be willing to use it for other people's sake. We have to be willing to step outside the shield that it provides us and become vulnerable. To an outsider that might sound like hard scary dangerous work, but to those of us who know that we want a God who is with us, that's a warm invitation to be right there with God.

In confirmation classes I like to ask the kids often, "Where have you seen God?" One time at one church, the kids said the usual: they saw God in puppies and sunsets and when their brother gave them back the toy that he stole and their parents and so on. Then this one girl named Tammy told her story. She said there was a girl in her Junior High who was always bullied. Now, she didn't really like the girl; she could understand why people would bully her, because she wasn't really actually very likable, but she also felt really bad how much she got

bullied. There was a day that week when she walked into the lunchroom and everyone was sitting at their table with their friends, except this girl who was way off in the corner all by herself. And Tammy said, "I don't know what got into me but I just thought that was wrong."

So she took her lunch over and sat down next to that girl and she said she could just feel all the eyes of the lunchroom staring at her as if saying, "That's not what we do. You're not *her* friend are you?" And for a moment she said, "I realized what it must be like to be that girl, and it felt terrible. I went down and I sat next to her and in the middle of that terrible feeling there was this deep..." and she paused and I could tell she was not sort of sure of the word, and she finally said, "Well, it was peace. I felt like I was in the right place. Is that God?"

I think that's what Jesus is inviting us into, even when our hearts are broken, even when we're struggling, even when it's hard. Jesus says, "Come, come be with me." This is where we're so close to the God who's with us. We step outside all the shields and the barriers that keep us separated from other people, that keep us separated from God. And when we become vulnerable, that's God. That's where God is most close to us.

When Jesus says, "Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, go the second mile," it sounds a whole lot to me like Jesus saying, "Come to me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you— we will be yoked together in this work—and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls, for my burden is easy and my yoke is light."