

“Really, Jesus?”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
February 19, 2017

**Matthew 5: 38-48**

I have a confession to make. I like to watch action movies and television shows. There, I’ve said it.

Around our house, we call such viewing “boy movies.” When the women in my household walk in and see an army battle or fight scene or car chase on the television, they ask, “Is this a boy movie?” I say, “Yes,” and they usually escape to the upstairs or downstairs. But don’t worry – I also watch my fair share of cooking shows and HGTV and movies that they prefer!

I don’t know what it is about these “boy movies” that draws me in. Maybe it’s the mindless action and plot lines, which doesn’t require me to think too much while I watch. Maybe it’s the fantasy side of these movies, and how when you start watching it, you wonder if this could really happen, especially to you.

One of my favorite shows over the years has been “24.” It’s a television show on Fox which over the course of the season covers one complete day of action; in other words, twenty-four hours of real-time events. This year they have rebooted the show with a new lead actor, and it’s set in Washington, D.C., with its usual complement of various plot lines running simultaneously. I know I’ve been watching the show too much over the years when I could predict the plot twists this week even before they happened!

With a show like “24”, it’s usually clearly-defined who are the bad guys. This season, it’s a group of Middle Eastern terrorists. In past years, it’s been other radical, nationalist groups. But, as is often the case in such shows or movies, sometimes the enemy is not so obvious. For instance, in this last episode of “24”, someone who had originally appeared to be a “good guy” actually was the person who framed someone else to look like a “bad guy.” As they say, appearances can be deceiving.

How do we define who our enemies are today? Is an enemy seemingly clearly-defined as someone who is anti-American from a battlefield or country half a world away? Or is an enemy someone who personally offends you, and then fails to make amends with you? Is an enemy someone who, because of their ideas or beliefs, you label as “conservative” or “liberal”, “fundamentalist” or “free-spirit?” Is an enemy a poor beggar on the street; a teenager running around with the “wrong” crowd; a criminal sitting in jail – anyone who we do not wish to spend time with, or feel is interrupting our lives when they approach us for help? Who is our enemy? Is it as clearly-defined as we would think?

After reading a passage like today’s from the Gospel of Matthew, my first reaction is usually, “Really, Jesus? You want me to do what?” And yet, if

I and we are to be faithful disciples of his, we have to hear Jesus tell us these hard lessons, which represent the absolute, radical nature of the gospel.

He starts by saying, “Do you remember an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth? Well, that’s no longer the law.” Instead, Jesus says, “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.” In other words, don’t first think how you will retaliate when someone wrongs you; instead, think of how you will return hatred with love, and evil with grace.

Nothing in the Old Testament resembles so starkly Jesus’ command to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” And just when we are hoping to qualify who our enemies are, Jesus stops us cold by stating that God “makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” Does this mean God has created both good and evil? No; rather that both are present and exist in God’s good creation. God is the Lord over all, and God’s love encompasses all that is in God’s Kingdom.

If we didn’t get the point the first time, Jesus tries another approach to illustrate his point. “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” It’s much easier for us to choose to love our friends, family, and “good people,” because we know them, we trust them, and we know that our love will be appreciated and reciprocated. Jesus says that is all well and good, but you won’t know what God’s love is really all about until you start reaching out to the stranger, the isolated, the “enemies” in your midst. That is when you will experience the fullness of God’s grace – when you embody and express the radical love of God to this world.

Really, Jesus? I mean, can’t you and God just lay off us a little. We have enough trouble sometimes loving our friends, our family, the person sitting next to us in the pew. Now you want me to love my enemy and pray for those who persecute me? Really?

Jason Byassee was a classmate of mine in college, and is now a professor at Vancouver School of Theology. He writes: One ancient Christian teacher said, “The Lord who accompanies us on our journey offers his own cheek to slap and his shoulders to whip, to the increase of his glory.” We are called here to love as God loves. This cannot be done out of our own resources. So (Jesus’ words are) no admonition to try harder – if it were, it would indeed be a recipe for despair. It is a plan of action rooted in the promise to be made “children of your Father in heaven” (v.45). The Sermon (on the Mount) here and elsewhere is a portrait of the very heart of God, one who loves the unlovable, comes among us in Christ, suffers our worst, and rises to forgive us. Turn the cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy – because that is how God loves. If you want to follow this God, fleshed in Jesus, you will be adopted into a life in which you find yourself loving this way before you know what you are doing (Jason Byassee, [Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1](#), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 382).

Perhaps one reason we try to dilute what Jesus is saying about loving our enemies is that he ends this passage by saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That’s impossible, right? Well, consider how the Revised English Bible translates this verse: “There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds.” For Matthew, perfection does not mean without fault, but rather being complete and holy, as we find in the Old Testament book of Leviticus: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). Jesus does not expect those who hear his words to never make another mistake. He expects us to show kindness and “goodness” to our neighbor and our enemy, in the same way God has shown boundless goodness to us.

One commentator writes: We are amazed by people’s capacity to do things that defy our natural instincts: the survivor of a violent crime who is able to forgive her tormenter; black South Africans who work with their former oppressors to rebuild their country; the Mother Teresas of the world who give selfless service to outcasts; those who live modestly so they can contribute to the well-being of the less fortunate; and those who make a choice to commit random acts of kindness. We are surrounded by examples of unselfish love and caring; we need only look for them. God’s realm is already active and moving toward fulfillment.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lets us eavesdrop on his instructions to the disciples. We too are encouraged to live as sisters and brothers in God’s realm. “Be perfect” is not an indictment; it is a promise that carries the possibility that we may love the world as God has loved us – fully, richly, abundantly, and completely (Barbara Essex, *ibid*, 384).

Open your eyes and your hearts, and see how God’s realm is present in your midst. Lay down your fear and anxiety, and consider how God has loved you unconditionally, so you might love those who are different than yourself. When the world judges and separates humanity into warring factions, remember our Lord’s command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Is it easy? Absolutely not. It is natural to respond with, “Really?!?” Following Christ often means acting counter to what the masses expect or want.

But our Lord never promised that being his disciple would be easy. We are not called to what is easy. We are called to what is hard – including “loving the world as God has loved us – fully, richly, abundantly, and completely.”

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Really? Yes, really.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.