

Covenant Word

A Failure of Imagination

Psalm 119:33-40; I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
February 19, 2017*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

It is a reward for getting on the tread mill: forty-five minutes set aside not just to exercise, but to read fiction. One of my favorite authors is Louise Penny. She creates mysteries around the formidable Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the Surete de Quebec. At least one seemingly, unsolvable death occurs in each novel, as well as layered relationships and evidence through which to sift in order to come up with a suspect. Now Gamache is a man of integrity and earns enormous respect by his peers. The author describes his face as a lined map with the latitude and longitude of life etched there. It shows that Gamache has wandered into the wilderness of horrific and unspeakable acts as well as to experiences of immense happiness. In fact, she says, one finds something totally unexpected in his eyes. It is kindness.

As all good heroes must do, Gamache faces a nemesis in each mystery. The one I am currently reading presents the villain as his once best friend and colleague. They had been in one another's weddings and shared personal life experiences as well as professional until one went down a path that the other's integrity could not go. So en route to their confrontation, Gamache oddly thinks about the Great Wall of China and how it kept China safe for centuries. It did its job well, crossing mountains and gorges for thousands of miles to be a fortification against barbarians. It kept the Manchus out until they finally break through to conquer the Chinese. But they conquer the Chinese not because of their superior firepower, not because they are better strategists, and not because they are stronger warriors. They conquer the Chinese, because someone from inside the wall knew where to open a gate in the Great Wall. They open the gate from the inside letting the enemy without come in. Gamache is clear in his definition of an enemy: it is the one who knows your most vulnerable spot and opens that gate in order for damaging conquest to occur.

Who is your enemy?

Jesus doesn't waste time on defining who our enemies are, but we can guess their identity from the descriptive circumstances that he uses to illustrate His Sermon on the Mount. An enemy is anyone who strikes you on the cheek; anyone who asks you to carry their military gear for a mile; anyone who sues you so severely that even your coat gets taken; anyone who persecutes you. How do we know these are the enemies that occupy Jesus' mind? We know because Jesus gives us clear, practical suggestions with which to respond to these individuals.

Remember that in Matthew's gospel, Jesus loves the disciples enough to tell them what is required to be found faithful in following. He sits and explains to them, in a very practical fashion, what it takes to be salt and light, in order to embody the good news of the Kingdom. His content strikes hard against conventional wisdom. It collides with the world in such a way that we immediately recognize his lecture as one that we would not come up with on our own. No, the contents of the Sermon on the Mount have to be taught to us. Without the imagination of this teacher to expose us to varying possibilities, we would never know that the Kingdom is available to us right here and right now. (William Willimon, "Matthew 5:43-48," [Interpretation](#), January 2003)

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Jesus employs sharp contrasts to make His teaching points perfectly clear. "You have heard it said of old..." "But I say to you..." It is a way to gain our attention, so that we don't miss that what Jesus is proposing is quite new, revolutionary, odd. It is not that his teaching is difficult to understand. It is that His teaching is so hard *to do!* The German poet, Heine, says that it is not hard to forgive your enemies if they have been hung! And Nietzsche dismissed all talk of loving our enemies as "weak and dishonest." (Willimon)

Are they so wrong? Not only does loving our enemy, turning the other cheek, being perfect, etc., etc., etc. sound daunting and impossible. It also sounds a little limp, weak, meek and mild. The gospel seems to turn into "doormat religion," or religion that doesn't have the will to stand up and fight back, to resist evil and challenge injustice.

Like many parents, we ran into this with our children. They would come home from school and talk about bullies. We would advise in consistent



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ways: "Use your words. If words don't work, enlist the help of an adult." We thought this was enough, but apparently it was not in the eyes of David. He was in the third grade, and he loved his teacher. It was the second time that he had had her. Once in first grade and at the time of this story third. Apparently, all the other children knew he loved her. So on the playground one day, a boy named Matthew taunted David by saying ugly things about their teacher. Feeling his teacher's honor was at stake, David used his words mightily to defend her. When that didn't stop Matthew, David approached the teachers who were visiting on the playground bench. Not taken seriously there, when Matthew took their teacher's name in vain again, David knocked his lights out. As I recall, there was a bloody nose, and so David was sent home with a detention slip while the bully walked away unscathed. There were phone calls, teacher conferences, tears, letters of apology...you can imagine the drama. But if I am honest with you, when Lloyd and I were alone, we closed the door to our bedroom and did a victory dance.

That is what we want to do with our enemies. We want to give them what they deserve! We want to punch their lights out. We want them to get a little piece of comeuppance! We have not moved very far from the universally accepted law of retaliation: "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." If the driver in the car ahead cuts us off, let's do the same to them at the next light and maybe give a little one-finger urban salute while we are at it!

The crowds that Jesus addressed that day on the Galilean hillside, also knew what it was to be insulted, humiliated, slapped, beaten, crucified. The occupying Romans were within their legal rights to conscript civilians to carry their packs and equipment. The civilian, regardless of what they were doing, had to walk a mile with the soldier carrying all of their gear. The crowds were so defenseless that a small resistance group began to grow. They were the Zealots, and they carried small swords within the folds of their robes so that they could quietly and swiftly take down their Roman enemies. The Zealots made it a point to harass the Roman outposts and supply lines, as resistance groups are prone to do.

But Jesus says, "No, this is not the way God wants us to respond. Instead, use your imagination to come up with a better way." In the Sermon on the Mount, He is inviting us to a whole new way of thinking about faith and the religious practices that follow from that faith. Jesus is not giving us more laws to uphold. There are already plenty of laws and if we are going to be righteous (a word from a couple of Sundays ago), then we must exceed the activities of the most righteous, i.e., the Pharisees who never disobey a single rule. Maybe this story from the Muslim tradition will help us here. (Calum I. MacLeod, "Going the Second Mile," Fourth Presbyterian Church, 2-23-14)

There was a man named Nasrudden who found a diamond by the road. According to the law, finders became keepers only if they first announced their find in the center of the marketplace

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on three separate occasions. Now Nasrudden was too religious-minded to disregard the law but too greedy to run the risk of parting with the diamond. So on three consecutive nights, when he was sure that everyone was fast asleep, he went to the center of the marketplace and there announced, in a soft voice, "I have found a diamond on the road that leads to the town.

Anyone knowing who the owner is should contact me at once." No one, of course, was the wiser for his words, except for one man who happened to be standing at his window on the third night and heard Nasrudden mumble some words. When he attempted to find out what had been said, Nasrudden replied, "I'm in no way obligated to tell you, but this much I shall say, being a religious man, I went out there at night to pronounce certain words in fulfillment of the law."

Nasrudden had fulfilled what the law had required, but was it enough? Jesus would say "no," because Jesus is proposing something totally different from how the tedious keepers of the law behave. Jesus wants us to practice love and compassion that is so much more than just the rules. Jesus is looking to his followers to use their imaginations for solutions, so that we can refuse to respond to violence with more violence. ***Jesus is looking to his followers to think and act creatively, to employ our imaginations, to fantasize about what the kingdom might be like and then to have the courage to create it.*** Jesus doesn't want us to cut off our own feet, tear out our own eyes, pull logs out of eyes, stand still while someone slaps us twice, or skip our parent's funeral. Jesus is using these graphic examples to shake us out of habitual, deeply ingrained patterns of behavior in order that we might respond to our enemies with unexpected creativity. Jesus is challenging His followers to use their moral imagination. Graham Greene says in Power and Glory that hatred exists, enemies exist, because of our lack of imagination. How might we engage our imaginations, use our creative capacity, in order to create the Kingdom of God? If we could, would it inspire us to move toward the redemption and healing and transformation of which our world is in such, desperate need?

Jesus says that we possess the creative weapon of love to challenge the systems that cause brokenness and death. So when a Jewish civilian is slapped in the face by a Roman official, instead of striking back, (which by the way could result in death or torture not just

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of the individual but their family as well), so instead of striking back or crumbling to the ground begging for mercy, what if, instead, what if the offended offers their other cheek? Something

changes profoundly in personal dynamics when the other cheek is offered. The one slapped becomes so much more than just a victim. He/she must be taken into account as a full human and not simply an object of abuse. (John Buchanan, 2-20-11, Fourth Church, Chicago, "A Whole New Morality.") It is far from a comfortable place, but it is responding to the call given to us that we are to love our enemies.

Gandhi built on these words of Jesus by growing movements of nonviolent resistance. It accomplished what decades of armed rebellion could not, namely the independence of India and the end of British colonial occupation. Even in our own country, we carry memories of bus and garbage boycotts and of African American young adults who sat at drug store counters while having ketchup and salt and pepper poured over their heads, because they had been trained in nonviolent resistance. Their intent to end segregation was a powerful motivator to endure. Martin Luther King Jr. uncovered an entire way of life in Jesus' command to "Love your enemies." He named that life the "beloved community," and in that community, God "changed the face of the enemy." ("Why We Can't Wait")

These Sundays that we have been studying The Sermon on the Mount, I find that I want to apologize. I want to make it easier for us. Some weeks I want to say "Oh Friends, God is nice so we should be nice too. Amen." I want to say Jesus' teachings are impossible, so don't even try. These words are purely figurative metaphors, so don't get too wrung out with guilt. I want to say love your enemies, because there is payback, a rewards system, a heavenly refund. Loving your enemies will prove that you are a better person. God will reward us for being sooooo righteous. Or to use Paul's words, love your enemies because it is a way to

... we are told that God's love is known in that the sun rises on the righteous and the unrighteous, that the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous...not because these are simply the natural order of things, but because God's love is so great, so big, so powerful that there is enough to go around...even to our enemies. Can we use our imaginations to love so generously? I believe we can, because the same God who loves the evil and the unjust, loves us and not only gives us the motivation and imagination to love in similar ways,

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"heap burning coals on their heads!" This, at least, feels good!

But I cannot say these things. I cannot save us from Jesus! Jesus who wants to engage our imaginations with such ingenuity that the depth and peculiarity of God's love is shown and shared. Scripture tells us, at the times when our behavior is in keeping with the character of God, then we are perfect, *teleios*, complete and mature. And then we are told that God's love is known in that the sun rises on the righteous and the unrighteous, that the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous...not because these are simply the natural order of things, but because God's love is so great, so big, so powerful that there is enough to go around...even to our enemies. Can we use our imaginations to love so generously? I believe we can, because the same God who loves the evil and the unjust, loves us and not only gives us the motivation and imagination to love in similar ways, but God will be faithful by giving us the **ability to follow through.**

I close with the words of Desmond Tutu, who encourages us with:

Goodness is stronger than evil;
Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness;
Life is stronger than death;
Victory is ours through [Christ] who loves us.

May it be so, Lord, may it be so. Amen.