Do not Attempt this with Small Children
A Sermon on Matthew 5:21-48 by the Rev. Philip Major
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No pressure, just be perfect. This is what we might describe with a wink as ‘the perfect ending’ for one of the most important passages in the Gospel of Matthew. I’ll begin by admitting I added eleven verses at the end of our assigned passage. The lectionary breaks this passage into three portions. The first four paragraphs are assigned to today, the sixth Sunday after the Epiphany. The second to the last paragraph is assigned to the seventh Sunday after the Epiphany. The final paragraph is assigned to Independence Day.

There are three problems with this arrangement. The first problem is that we don’t hold a special service on Independence Day, and if we did, I have a feeling most of you would not be attending. The second problem is that most years we do not have seven Sundays in the season of Epiphany, we usually have four or five or six. By my calculations the next opportunity for us to hear the second to the last paragraph will be on February 21, 2038. Please mark your calendars and make sure you are in church on February 21, 2038. The third problem with the lectionary arrangement is that these six paragraphs are part of a single, coherent message from Jesus to his disciples. When the passage is split into three sections it is difficult to hear the message.

As I work through this passage, I will be borrowing ideas from Eugene Boring’s commentary on Matthew. Unlike Mark, Luke and John, the Gospel of Matthew was composed for both Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ.

The Jewish orientation of the Gospel is evident in the structure of the book. Matthew has structured his Gospel around five sermons, or collections of teachings, of Jesus. Matthew’s arrangement of these materials in the form of five sermons can be seen as an allusion to the five books of the Torah. The first and the last are the most substantial and serve as anchors for the entire Gospel. You have probably heard the name of the first of these sermons; it’s called the Sermon on the Mount. The last of the five sermons concludes with this memorable passage: *I was hungry and you gave me food. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.* Today we are looking at some of the most memorable sections of the Sermon on the Mount. Our Gospel passage for today is the core of the Sermon on the Mount.

Today’s passage is organized around six antitheses. In each paragraph Jesus begins by stating one of the laws of the Torah. Jesus affirms the theme, but then he goes deeper to a spiritual quality that undergirds the theme. Then in the first three examples he gives a description of what it will look like to uphold this principle in the kingdom of heaven.

For instance, in the first paragraph Jesus quotes Exodus 20: “You shall not murder.” Then Jesus radicalizes the commandment by identifying anger and hostility as a central spiritual challenge for his disciples. Murder is the most tragic manifestation of a universal spiritual challenge: our feelings of hostility. At some point in our lives we have to deal with some sort of feelings of hostility. Anger and hostility create a barrier between us and other people, and between us and the full realization of our identity as God’s children.

Then Jesus gives specific examples of ways we hurt other people and ourselves when we act with hostility. Jesus gives a detailed description of what it will look like to deal with our feelings of hostility. He identifies the key issue, which is that we are unable to move forward in life when we do not directly address conflicts with others. Jesus says, *when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and*
offer your gift. When we live the kingdom life we honestly address conflicts with others in order to live together as brothers and sisters as God intends for us.

Of course, this teaching does not magically eliminate the power dynamics found in our relationships. The example is given between a brother or sister, which is a good example of a relatively equal relationship. I’d like to suggest that this teaching needs to be read in light of the relationships of power that exist in our lives; if a twelve year old child is having a conflict with their mother or father, in most cases it is the responsibility of the parent to play a primary role in working for reconciliation.

As our Gospel passage continues, Jesus brings five fundamental spiritual issues to the surface: love, lust, telling the truth, the problem of violence and the breaking of marriage relationships. Eugene Boring makes the point that all of these issues are ultimately about the nature of love. Following his example, I summarize these six paragraphs with six ideas about love. In the first paragraph the message is that love shows no hostility. In the second we learn that love is not predatory. In the third the message is that love upholds healthy marriage relationships. In the fourth, love is unconditionally truthful. In the fifth, love does not retaliate. These verses point to one of the fundamental ideas of Jesus’ teachings: our spiritual life is inseparably linked to our relationships with other people.

In the sixth and final paragraph Jesus arrives at the central challenge, and the central possibility in our lives as Christians: the power of forgiveness. Jesus says, *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.* For followers of Christ the great engine of transformation lies in this truth; love, as revealed in the life of Christ, extends to our enemies. Jesus concludes by saying, *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

In order to understand what Jesus is saying, let’s consider one of my favorite toys, which is a ping pong ball. This ping pong ball is perfectly round. Before the industrial revolution there were no perfectly round ping pong balls. As would be illustrated by a two thousand year old wheel, or a two thousand year old ping pong ball, in Jesus’ time, the idea of perfection was more about wholeness or completion and less about the absence of errors.

Jesus is leading us on a spiritual path of wholeness. We are trying to move forward on God’s path of love. There are many different aspects, there are many different steps on the path. Some of the steps are easier, so they come first. In order to illustrate the different steps on the path to wholeness, consider the kinds of learning that are possible for little children, then for older children, then for adults.

Thirty-two years ago, I was a preschool teacher. I taught a class of four-year-olds. One of the most important things for young children is to learn how to play with other children without resorting to acts of physical aggression. We worked on things like taking turns using a favorite piece of equipment on the playground.

Twenty years ago, I was a third grade teacher. I taught a class of eight and nine year olds. One of the most important things for older children is to learn how to include the contributions of each member of the group. We worked on things like listening while other people are talking. The children practiced responding to others with words that showed they were listening. This would have been an unreasonable expectation for little children, but it was possible for many older children.

Three years ago, Nancy and I were leading a week long course for mature adults at a Quaker Conference at Niagara University. We led a group of six couples in activities to promote strong, healthy relationships. One of the most important things for mature adults is to build trust in long term relationships.

During the week we helped couples learn and practice using tools to facilitate productive, healthy conversations in their marriages. As we began our final day of the course I asked the
participants to try something I would have never suggested to children. I asked them to begin a short time of meditation and said, “As you begin, consider your feelings and intentions for your partner. Consider that your feelings and intentions for your partners will somehow be communicated, even if only in the most subtle way, in the course of your conversation. Now consider the feelings and intentions you want to communicate to your partner, through your words and through non-verbal communication.”

Put another way, I encouraged the participants to shape and guide their inner intentions and feelings. I was startled to hear myself give these instructions for these adults to essentially ‘change their feelings’. Years of work with children taught me that it never helps to try to get children to change their feelings. When you are teaching young children, physical actions are the primary area for attention; it is never helpful to try to get them to change their feelings. When you are working with older children, words are the primary area for attention; it would be foolish to try to get them to change their feelings. However I am gradually learning that, with years of attention and practice and prayer, mature adults are able to adjust and even change their feelings, or at least to manipulate their intentions for others.

Jesus is guiding us on a spiritual path in a similar way. This is not something to attempt with small children, but mature adults can make progress on the spiritual path to the point where we are able to manipulate our feelings and intentions for others. These changes are made through the work of the body and the work of the mind and the work of prayer.

The way Jesus describes is not easy, but our path is steep and rocky and rough regardless of whether or not we are attempting to love our enemies. The truth is that most of us have plenty of reasons to feel angry or to try to seek revenge. The truth is that the terrain we are moving through in life is extremely challenging. If it wasn’t challenging Jesus wouldn’t be talking about loving our enemies or praying for those who persecute us.

Jesus leads us on a way that brings a change in our actions, in our words, and ultimately in our hearts. Jesus leads us on a way that changes and expands our understanding of what it means to love. Jesus leads us on a way where we move forward, not by our own strength alone, but by the grace of God and in the support of this fellowship of disciples.