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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:38-48
First Presbyterian Church
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Striving for Perfection?

Jesus is at it again. Or, I guess, more accurately, Jesus is *still* at it. This week's reading follows the section of the Sermon on the Mount where he talks about our relationships with one another and challenges us to be people who live according to the spirit of the Law rather than merely by its letter, the one where Jesus challenges us to go beyond the mere basics into the heart of love, the heart of God. Now, as if that weren't hard enough to do with people we might actually like and care about, Jesus ups the ante once again: we are to love our *enemies* as well.

Wow. That word *enemy* is such a heavy one. Deep down, in your heart of hearts, who is *your* enemy? I've asked that question in a number of different settings over the years, and each time, I've gotten those kinds of looks that tell you the person is cool, calm and collected on the surface but squirming like mad deep inside. We've read these verses often enough to know—or at least give lip service to knowing—that, as “good Christians,” we aren't supposed to have enemies, that we're supposed to love one another. Oh, we may feel comfortable enough with some pretty vicious trash-talking when it comes to politics. We may not turn a hair when it comes to casting another group of people or a particular nationality or specific ideology (and those who hold it) in the role of “demon”—even though scripture is meant to apply in those situations, too. Those are fairly standard, “safe,” almost *distant* enemies to have—why, they hardly seem like *real* enemies at all—we just “disagree”... and can't be bothered to try to understand one another, can't be bothered to work toward reconciliation. But we have a much harder time admitting—even to ourselves sometimes—that way down deep in our heart, there are family members we just can't forgive for what they've said or done... a neighbor we wish would move to the farthest end of the earth so we'd never have to deal with them again... a former friend who wishes we were dead (and maybe, just maybe, we feel the same way about them). We can have a hard time naming just who our enemy is, or even admitting that we have one.

The people who first heard Jesus say these words didn't have that problem. They *knew*. The *Romans*—and all those who collaborated with them to oppress the Jewish people—that's who the enemy was. Just because they had defeated the Jewish people and occupied their land, the Romans were on top, and everybody knew it. Not only did they hold all the best cards, the deck was stacked against the Jewish people on every front. If you had something a Roman wanted, he could take it—whether it was your coat or your labor or your dignity—and there wasn't a whole lot you could do about it. I have no doubt that Roman arrogance and brutality were the kindling for multitudes of dark fantasies of rebellion and revenge among the people who came to hear Jesus teach and preach.

Imagine how shocked they must have been when they heard what he had to say. “Forget about tit-for-tat,” he tells them—and us. “Don't let their contempt and disregard for you be the measure of your heart. Don't let their hatred and disdain define you,” he says. “Instead,” he says, “be defined by *God's love*, living and breathing in you.”

When God's love moves into your heart and takes root in your life, then you can choose to not see yourself as a victim of another's contempt. You can choose to respond with kindness and generosity rather than resentment and bitterness. You can choose to spin the relationship in a different direction, one that holds possibility for something new. You can choose to break the cycle of offense and retaliation. You can choose, moment by moment, little by little, the way of love and life instead of the path of hatred and death. You can choose freedom, in and through Christ and Christ's way of grace and mercy.

The specific actions that Jesus describes here are ones that throw a little sand into the machinery of oppression, that tilt the scales in a different way, that cause the other person, the enemy, to step back and see things in a different light, too. Oh, maybe not all at once, of course, but slowly, gradually, like water dripping on rock, the hardness of heart can be worn away so that something new—new life, new ways of being in relationship with one another—can emerge.

Jesus closes this section of his remarks with what seems like an impossible injunction: "Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." Isn't what he's already asked us to do hard enough? How can we—hurt and broken people trapped in relationships marked by strife and enmity and hate—how can we ever be "perfect" as God is perfect?

Part of the answer lies in the Greek word that gets translated here as "perfect." It is a word that also means "complete" or "whole." We move toward wholeness, toward being "complete" people, when we live in the sorts of relationships God created us for, way back there in the very beginning, before sin entered the picture—relationships of care and regard, of help and support, of love and mutuality. So striving to live in those kinds of ways with those around us is one way we can be "perfect." We can be complete. We can be whole. These kinds of relationships are God's gift to us and God's way of blessing for us. We don't have to settle for less.

There's a challenge for us here as well, of course, for God wants us to grow deeper and stronger in our love for God and for one another. And so Jesus tells us that we are to strive for this sort of relationship with *everyone*, not just the ones we like and who are easy to get along with. And the reason behind that is because that is the sort of God who has created and loves *us*... even when we aren't very good at loving God back.

Think about it. If God only loved those who were always good and kind and peaceful and joyful and all those other wonderful qualities we think of as the results of loving God with every part of our beings, well, how many of us would make the grade? Would *any* of us? Is there anyone among us who has never been angry? Anyone who has never told even the tiniest lie? Never chosen the path of least resistance in spite of what our conscience was whispering in our ear? Never turned away from someone who was lonely and just needed a few moments of our time? Never neglected to feed the hungry or clothe the naked or give a cup of cold water to the thirsty, even by simply failing to notice the need? Never broken a promise, no matter what the reason? Never shared what we have grudgingly instead of joyfully? Never given something—or someone—first place in our lives, the place that belongs to God alone?

The list could go on and on, of course. In these, and a million other ways, we declare ourselves the enemy of God, often without noticing what we have done. We are shocked when we realize how often and how unthinkingly we have betrayed the One who loves us so much.

And that's the other part of being "perfect": God refuses to declare us God's enemy, in spite of all we have done wrong. God loves us still, and comes to us in Jesus so that we will know that beyond a shadow of a doubt. In Jesus, God shares our common life, our suffering, and

even our death, so that we might know new life, abundant life, in this world and the world to come. God calls us not enemy, but “beloved,” “child,” God’s own.

If we are loved with such an unbridled, extravagant love, how can we respond with less than our whole selves, our whole lives? How can we settle for relationships that are less than true reflections of the grace and mercy we have received? How can we not strive to “be perfect even as [our] Father in heaven is perfect,” loving even those who don’t always (or ever) do a very good job of loving us back?

We will not always get it right, of course. We will stumble and fall and fail. But when we do, we can trust that God is ready and willing to pick us up, dust us off, and help us try once more, for God loves us beyond measure and wants us to love one another, too.

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift of love. Amen.