

## ***SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY***

*Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23; Matthew 5:38-48*

What was Jesus thinking with this ‘turn the other cheek’ stuff?

Are we supposed to be doormats for the sake of our faith?

A quick, simple reading of Jesus’ words might seem to indicate the “doormat approach” and yet, we see Jesus, not as a wimpy shadow of the Almighty, but as God with Us, the very Image of the Living God. We see Jesus as the defender of the poor, the downtrodden, the maligned and mistreated. We see Jesus as Savior and Lord. None of these attributes equate to “doormat.”

So how are we to interpret these words of our Savior?

Another relevant question might be, do we take Jesus seriously, or is there some nifty interpretation that helps to explain away Jesus’ words, or at least provide some general guidance in terms of when to turn the other cheek and love our enemies? The words that Jesus utters are not easy ones to follow, regardless of how conflict-averse we might be. We are created with a “fight or flight response,” nestled comfortably in that primitive area of our brains that is not always adequately governed by the reason of our cerebral cortexes.

Those primitive responses are pre-programmed to help ensure the survival of the individual, and thereby the species. We fight or flee, because our point and purpose is to “live to fight another day,” to preserve our well-being. But our job, as followers of Christ, is to stay close in confrontation and conflict, not fighting or fleeing, in order to follow the example of our Lord, and to

show the Power of God's Love to overcome all things: bodily assault; legal prosecution; even kidnapping.

And while it is often easier and more pleasant to stay close to those whom we already know and for whom we already care, Jesus addresses that as well. As difficult as it might be to remain in relationship with those whom we already know and love, Jesus essentially says that we don't get credit for working at those relationships; it's the ones with the strangers, the relationships with those who we do not know, or maybe don't like, or who don't like us, that count.

None of this makes any sense whatsoever without the gift of God's Love. It is only by this most amazing gift, delivered by the Holy Spirit, that we can hope to overcome our preprogrammed response to fight or flee, and bear witness to the God that we serve.

But isn't it possible to horribly twist this sort of logic? Isn't it conceivable that we put ourselves directly in harm's way and risk embarrassment, or even injury, or death? Isn't it quite possible that we could become the doormats of the world, be considered weak and ineffective in our proclamation of the gospel? Of course all those things are possible, even quite probable; but that is exactly the risk our God took in sending Jesus for us. That is exactly what Jesus did when he allowed himself to be beaten, accused, and crucified. We have the gift of access to relationship with a God, who desires that relationship so much, that even the only child of the Almighty is not withheld. We are given the opportunity to bask in the glow of a love so powerful, that, even death, cannot contain it.

But this is not an easy reading today. It is also not an excuse to

do nothing, for Jesus is speaking about our actions on behalf of ourselves, in our own self-interest. Our agency, our defense, our protection is not for ourselves, but for the sake of others. If we are to follow our Lord's path, we are to use our personal power, influence, reputation, gifts, and wealth, on behalf of those who have no power, influence, wealth, or reputation. Being "perfect" is treating the "evil and the good", and "the righteous and the unrighteous", as God treats them, providing them with the same opportunity to live as everyone else. Again, our witness is not true and authentic if we portray to the world actions that preserve only ourselves. Our witness is to be given in actions that show our desire to see that all know the benefits of the love of God.

This is difficult, because it forces us to move ourselves out of the center of the relationship; our center is focused on another.

We are asked not commanded, to submit to the love of God, so that love can show us the way. That love is the way that we are ultimately made safe. We are only ever truly safe in the love of God.

Many questions might be forming and noisily calling for attention and answers, but the specific questions and situations have already been answered in the life and witness of Jesus Christ. We speak the truth that God loves all people, that God makes the necessities of life available to all, both evil and good, righteous and unrighteous, that retribution is not the way to show the justice of God.

When we are out there alone as Jesus was, in a community governed by power that seeks to preserve its own hold on others, we are subject to the persecution, betrayal, and death that Jesus endured. But we, as Christ's followers, can be working to create

systems and communities where we will not be out there alone.

We have the benefit of the gospel and the knowledge of God's overwhelming grace and love, that is able to sustain us and protect us, and even overcome the power of death. We have the chance to work to nurture children and young adults that understand that their well-being is only secure in the securing of the well-being of others, all others. We are the people to whom God is looking to make the effort to see that all are treated even as God treats all.

So, are we to be doormats? Are we to meekly submit to the persecution of this world and our enemies? To borrow a phrase from the Apostle Paul, "By no means!"

What we are to be, is those people who do not seek to simply protect what they have, or what is their own, but who seek to protect others. This profound lack of self-interest and self-protection is rooted in the desire of a community of believers to protect one another, to make sure that all people in all communities, both enemies and friends, have access to the means of life and know the benefit of God's awesome and amazing love.

**AMEN.**