

Jesus' Beatitudes: Heavenly Wisdom to Chart Our Reset
 7th in 8-Sermon Series: *Blessed are the Peacemakers*
 Micah 4:1-4 ~ Matthew 5:9 ~ Matthew 5:43-48
 11th Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 16, 2020
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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson:

Reversal. Retooling. Recycling. Did you know that 2700 years ago, way back in the late 8th century BCE, when the prophet Micah was running around stirring up trouble, there was some serious recycling going on? To conserve scrap metal way back then, in times of war they would take their agricultural tools, like their plowshares and their pruning hooks, and turn them into weapons to fight a war with. That vivid phrase you heard Janet read, "*they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks,*" casts a vision of reversing and retooling that practice. Unlikely, courageous work accomplished by the whole community. A world where there would be no fear and therefore, no war, "*nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*" These verses found verbatim also in Isaiah 2:4, were likely borrowed by Micah and Isaiah from another anonymous prophet because of their power to convey God's stunning vision of God's people as peace makers. Beat those swords and spears back to their original purpose and shape: to till the land and tend the crops. Yes, from death and destruction to life.

Jesus takes up this very vision now in our 7th beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Yes, he moves from the sixth beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God," which centers our attitude and way of being, headlong into another "Do-attitude." And it is a doozy. From the frying pan of willing one thing, God's will, into the fire: Loving your enemies. Improbable, but not impossible. Kind of like recycling. Back to the Garden. Time to dig in.

Sermon:

"May I take your order?" "Yes, I'd like a medium coffee black, ancient grain bagel toasted, with plain cream cheese." "Will that be all?" "Yes." "Perfect!" Maybe you heard it when you were on the phone making a doctor's appointment, the scheduler suggests a time that you agree to, and then she says, "Perfect!" Have you noticed how the word, "perfect" has slipped into our every day conversation more and more? For things that are less and less important? It certainly has found its way into mine.

And here the word "perfect" appears after 27 verses of Jesus' "antitheses"—a fancy word for his long list of "You have heard it said, but I say to you." Where he takes several commandments and brings them back to the garden, so to speak, back to their deep, original intent. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." I have good news for you, if this sounds like Jesus is telling us to never mess up. Never make a mistake—right commanding us to do things that are incredibly hard. Is God demanding the impossible?

I wouldn't be surprised if two or three of you who are watching this sermon achieved an 800 or perfect score on both of your SAT's. And I know that this morning's Lector, Janet Singer, told me her husband, Norbert, bowled a perfect game of 300. More than once. But not every time. Apparently, the odds are 11,500 to 1 for the average bowler. No batter, not even the Hall of Famers, ever batted 1,000, nor does even Gold medal gymnast Gabby Douglas stick *every* landing. You get my point: it's impossible to be perfect at anything 100% of the time, much less being perfect in the sense of never making a mistake when it comes to being a human being.

Here's the good news: when Jesus says, "Be Perfect," he does not mean, "never mess up." He is not expecting us to live an error-free life. Perfect here *does not mean* never make a mistake. Nor does he mean "be perfect" in the legalistic sense of keeping all the laws of the community and never breaking one of the 613 commandments in his Jewish tradition. Rather "Be perfect" means, "Be whole, be complete."

Being a peacemaker, along with practicing all of the other beatitudes can be summed up in the rich fullness of the Hebrew word, "Shalom." A word that means peace, within and between each of us and all of us. And so much more. Shalom is a way of being, it is a vision and it is a call to action. It is a call to enact those peaceful relationships and that flourishing in the world, here and now. Anywhere there is a breakdown or an absence of justice in a community, shalom is ruptured.ⁱ

You may be asking, "Where is the peace, where is Shalom on our streets and our virtual world? We cannot agree on use of masks, or how best to do school this fall, or whether or not it's safe to play football, or how to run a free and fair election in the midst of the pandemic?" Do we know the things that make for peace? That was Jesus' lament as he looked over Jerusalem when he entered it for the last time. Luke records that as Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day that things that make for peace!" (Luke 19:41-42)

Jesus told us what makes for peace: Love your enemies. Yes: our enemies are also our neighbors, as in "Love your neighbor." There was no asterisk "except for your enemies," in that command. Improbable, but not impossible. God does it. Jesus does it. And we are God's children. So, we have it in us too. Somewhere. It takes work and faith and time. As South African Nobel Peace Prize winning peacemaker Nelson Mandela has said, "To make peace with an enemy one must work with that enemy and that enemy becomes one's partner."ⁱⁱ It seems like as a culture we are getting worse at this and not better.

To learn and relearn the things that make for peace, let's start with the wisdom of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She teaches peace like this: "Begin where you are to bring love into one life at a time. I never think in terms of a crowd, only of one person. If I visualized a crowd I would never get started. What matters is the individual person."ⁱⁱⁱ Her approach resonates with Jesus' parable in Matthew 25, where our faith is judged by our capacity to respond to one other person in need, "I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink." (Matthew 25:35)

We have some retooling to do. But rather than learning how to work with metal and beat swords into plowshares today, we have other tools to help us. The first, is our Bible—that's why we just gave our six new Confirmands the tool of a Harper Collins Study Bible. I have a practical tool to offer to you right now. It is called the "Family Pledge of Nonviolence," and includes seven things you can start to do today in order to be a peacemaker as Jesus is calling us to do in this beatitude. Making peace must start within ourselves and in our family.

Here is what we will do *as best we can* to become nonviolent and peaceable people, to become perfect, in the biblical sense of wholeness, of Shalom. Here they are. I will:

Respect Self and Others

To respect myself, to affirm others, and to avoid uncaring criticism, hateful words, physical attacks, and self-destructive behavior.

Communicate Better

To share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger, and to work at solving problems peacefully.

Listen carefully

To listen carefully to one another, especially those who disagree with me, and to consider others' feelings and needs rather than insisting on having my own way.

Forgive

To apologize and make amends when I have hurt another to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.

Respect Nature

To treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.

Play Creatively

To select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting funny, or acceptable.

Be Courageous

To challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community, and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.^{iv}

The pledge gives us concrete ways to begin where we are, in our families--as Mother Teresa has taught. Wholeness in our individual, immediate relationships builds the community and the spiritual strength to work for peace and justice in our community and world. What are the steps we might take as we look out into the wider community? I have a short clip where Bryan Stevenson, Lawyer, social justice activist and the director of the Equal Justice Initiative offers us "Four Things You Need to Do To Change The World." I'm sharing them with you this morning because I was struck by the resonance of these four things with Jesus' beatitudes.

These four things almost sound like present day versions of Jesus' beatitudes to me. Here he is: [Here's the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vI7UPuCUrE>]

Stay hopeful, Bryan? How can we, being cost/benefit calculating, cerebral people have hope when we look around at this increasingly divisive, toxic environment in which we live? We have hope for the same reason we eagerly gifted our confirmands with study Bibles. We have hope because we are Easter people. We have hope because we know that Jesus took a tool of torture, lynching by crucifixion on a cross, and beat that sword by resurrection. That tool of torture now stands in the center of our sanctuary and our hearts to help us claim and reclaim, the truth the LOVE wins. The truth that good is stronger than evil. Jesus loved his enemies. Jesus taught us the things that make for peace.

Children of God, Offspring of the One who loves us unconditionally: we were born for this! Jesus died and was raised for this. We can do this, together. One person, one decision at a time. Imperfect as we all are, stumbling our way into wholeness.

Let us pray:

Loving God, you sent Jesus so show us how to be peacemakers. Jesus, you listened carefully to everyone. You cared about the feelings of others. You forgave those who hurt you. Your heart went out to people no one else cared about. Jesus, send us your Spirit to help each of us be truthful whenever we speak, loving whenever we act, and courageous whenever we find violence or injustice around us. Help us know and do the things that make for peace.^v

ⁱ [<https://institute.ijm.org/blog/shalom>]

ⁱⁱ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, (Little, Brown, and Co.: New York, NY, 1994), Foreword, p.1.

ⁱⁱⁱ E. Glenn Hinson, "On Being 'God's Pencil' ," *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, November/December 1998, p.36.

^{iv} James McGinnis, "The Family Pledge of Nonviolence: A Way of Living that Makes for Peace," *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, November/December 1998, pp. 29-30.

^v Ibid, (slightly revised)