Pastor Joel preached this sermon on the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, February 20, 2011. It is based on the gospel reading for that day, Matthew 5:38-48, as well as the Old Testament lesson, Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18. It is entitled, “Be Holy. Be Perfect.”

The Sermon on the Mount, that part of Matthew’s gospel that runs from chapters 5-7, holds some very difficult teachings of Jesus, and last week’s and today’s readings are no exception. Called the “Messiah’s Inaugural Address” by biblical commentator Douglas Hare, the Sermon on the Mount plays a fundamental role in Matthew’s gospel. It includes the Beatitudes; the call to be “salt” and “light”; Jesus’ announcement that he came to “fulfill” and not “destroy” the Mosaic law; the six “antithesis” or those sayings that begin, “You have heard it said . . .” followed by one of the ten commandments or a part of the Deuteronomic code, and then followed by “but I say . . .” and followed by Jesus’ own take on that teaching, of which our reading today is part of; and then some other teachings about personal piety, including the Lord’s Prayer, money and wealth, on judging others, the Golden Rule, and ending with an exhortation to his disciples to take seriously these teachings. For Matthew, this Sermon on the Mount sets the stage for who Jesus is, not simply a teacher or prophet, but Israel’s Messiah, whose words and life set forth the way to God’s kingdom.

But the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel places great demands on his disciples and his teachings are difficult, even for us in our time. And so, as I pondered this passage this last week, I presented this reading to the Wednesday evening Communion group at the parsonage. After some good discussion, I think the primary question was about that idea of being “perfect” and whether or not that was too idealistic. Susan relayed a story about a young girl in one of her Sunday School classes from a previous church, who’s response to Jesus command to “turn the other cheek” was simply, “That’s stupid!” She and the other children could not understand why anyone would let someone slap them without just slapping them back! And for many of us, we respond, if not so adamantly, in much the same way. Why would Jesus suggest such a thing?

Well, these passages do come with two millennia worth of baggage, so let’s first try to unpack some of that baggage.

Jesus says, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” First, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” comes from three references in the Jewish Tanakh, in Exodus (21:23-24), Leviticus (24:19-20), and Deuteronomy (19:21). And while such a law may sound harsh, scholars suggest it was made to deter vengeful killing, where in response to being injured in some way, a person or their family would seek to kill the perpetrator of the injury. This law sought to give a more just or balanced response for the one who had been harmed.

“You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Matthew 5:38-39

However, Jesus’ response is, “But I say, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” What is this about? Well, apparently it was the custom in that time, that if you wanted to assert your authority, dominance and higher place in society over someone from a lower class, you might strike them on the cheek, with the back of your right hand. It was a very offensive gesture. A kind of putting one in their place. The left hand however, could not be used in this way because it was the hand used for unclean purposes. And so, if after being struck across the right cheek, if one turned the other cheek, in essence daring the striker to hit again, they could not do it, unless they were to strike again with the right hand, using an open hand or resorting to punch the other. This however was something one would do only to someone who was your equal. Thus, by turning the other cheek, one was in effect, demanding equality with the other, rejecting any assumption of lower status or class.
And what about the thing with the coat? Jesus says, “and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” When a person took out a loan from their neighbor, they might be asked to give something as a pledge until they could repay the loan. But for the poor, that might be their coat, that which kept them warm at night. Hebrew law specifically required such a pledge to be returned to the lender for the night. Secondly, by giving the lender “your cloak as well,” you would literally be giving them the shirt off your back, exposing your nakedness. Sounds embarrassing, right? Well, actually, the embarrassment was for the viewer, not the one naked. Seeing another naked was a shameful thing and therefore to be avoided at all cost. By insisting to give more than just the required coat, one put the lender in a difficult position, with the possibility of public shame or even the potential of breaking the law.

Then there is, “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” The Roman law of Angaria allowed soldiers and other Roman authorities to require persons in occupied territories to carry a message or equipment up to one mile, but not more. Continuing to go more than the one mile could get the soldier in trouble. Jesus saw this law as unjust and in this clever way was able to challenge it through non-violent means. At the same time, if a disciple did carry something farther for a soldier or other Roman, he might have a chance to share with him the gospel, which might either inspire the soldier towards Christianity, or teach him not to ask a Christian to carry his equipment again.

The last antithesis is, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven.” Well, scholars can’t seem to find in the Hebrew scriptures the part about hating your enemy, but there are places, such as the Psalms, where it is implied. But Jesus’ point seems to be that we are to love everyone, both neighbor and enemy alike. And this is where the “being perfect” stuff comes in.

He says, “You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The Greek word for “perfect” here can also be understood as “complete”, “mature”, or “fulfilled.” Heard like this, “You must be complete”, “You must be mature” or “fulfilled, as your heavenly Father is”, may help us a little. But “perfect” works just as well for me. The critical thing here is understanding how, Jesus is saying, we are to be perfect like God. And it goes back to where he says, “for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” In other words, God treats everyone the same, whether good or bad, and so should you. You are to be loving of all people, just as God is. You must be perfectly loving, just as God loves perfectly.

“You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matthew 5:48

Remember the Old Testament lesson today, part of what is called the “Holiness Code” from Leviticus. It is a recitation of the Ten Commandments also found in Exodus and Deuteronomy but here with some added instructions. And we hear interspersed among all the “you shall nots”, the words, “I am the Lord.” These are the laws that are to govern the people and they are to take seriously that they come from God. They are also the framework, that makes this people “holy”, different, set apart, just as their God is “holy”, set apart.

Jesus is saying the same thing to his disciples and all those gathered around to hear him. You are to be “perfect” just as God is “perfect.” But where the Holiness Code was an attempt to place rules and commandments upon the people from the outside, rules to govern them, Jesus’ teachings are meant to place
them inside the people, inscribe them upon their hearts and thus he says he comes not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

In all the examples he gives, in the antitheses which he proclaims, there seems to be one theme, and that is of an establishment of equality among all people. In his call not to “resist an evil doer”, not to return violence for violence, he does not suggest we become passive victims, but rather that we empower ourselves. In each of those illustrations, in turning the other cheek, giving your cloak as well as your coat, going the extra mile, he is not saying, give in to violent suppression, nor is he saying, react and fight back with the same kind of forceful might. Rather, he calls us to stand in the power of love, the perfect love of God, which really is the most powerful force in all creation.

What I really hear in these words of Jesus’, has to do with relationship, with looking past the acts of aggression and violence done to us and changing the dynamics of what connects us, seeing the person, the child of God on the other side. Seeing one who is equal, not better, not worse than us but a brother or sister, made in the image of God.

As I’ve watched the news broadcasts of the events happening in Egypt and the other places where peaceful protest have been going on, even amidst violent retribution, I can’t help but see the Spirit of Jesus, among those people, whether they are Christian or Moslem or secular atheists. What they are doing is seeking change, working to bring a more just, equal, egalitarian community into existence, to overcome the powers of violence, fear and destruction which they have known all too well. May God bless their efforts.

When it was said that the Egyptian army would not shoot upon their own people, I thought, yes, this is it, when we see others as our equals, as part of ourselves, a part of our own identity, we cannot bring harm upon them. When we acknowledge others as our equals, their suffering becomes our suffering, their hope, our hope, their freedom, our freedom, their joy our joy. Are we not called to support their striving for freedom and liberty and democracy as much as we would our own? I believe we are, in whatever ways we can.

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Being perfect doesn’t mean we don’t make mistakes, that we don’t have more to learn. Being perfect has more to do with striving to be better, more open, more loving. May we learn to be so perfect, complete, mature, fulfilled, in the love of God, so that all whom we meet might know that love as well. Amen.

“Rather, he (Jesus) calls us to stand in the power of love, the perfect love of God, which really is the most powerful force in all creation.”