

Sermon at St. Peter
February 23, 2014

Good morning! It's a pleasure to be with you this morning. Many of you I've known for a long time and many of you I've seen on the Habitat build site with hard hats on and sweat dripping down your brow – it's good to see you this morning – you clean up real nice! I've been with Habitat for over six years and before that I was the youth director at St. John's in Northfield for four years.

I attended the Northfield Ministerial meeting a few weeks ago and met your new pastor, Pastor Weeks. I was delighted when he asked if I'd come and share some words with you during worship. It's a nice chance for me to say to the whole congregation how much Habitat for Humanity appreciates your support. You've offered your prayers, financial contributions, time, and some really good food, on the build site. Know that your efforts have contributed to providing simple, decent and affordable housing to 32 families right here in our community and we hope that the experience was meaningful to you personally, and as a congregation. We're looking forward to the day when the snow is gone and we can begin the first of four houses that we're planning on in 2014. We've been granted our 9th Thrivent Builds grant from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans which aids in the cost of our Dundas house. We encourage you to read through the Habitat

information provided today to see how you can get involved in 2014. Many of you are familiar with the good work of Habitat so I won't talk much about our programs this morning – but, feel free to talk with me after worship. Habitat is a Christian organization so it's good for our organization to be challenged and inspired by the scriptures that are brought to us today.

Shortly after Pastor Weeks asked me to speak in worship he let me know what the gospel was going to be – an eye for an eye and love your enemies – and then he apologized. These are not the easiest scriptures to embrace and proclaim. In just a few short weeks our Lutheran lectionary brings us the very next chapter in Matthew – “Giving to the Needy” – now that's a scripture I could dig into – why couldn't that be the scripture today? I can make many parallels of how Habitat and our volunteers live out that teaching of helping our neighbor in need.

But preaching about how we are to love our enemies? Lifting up the idea of going back for more after someone slaps us on the cheek? This is not easy. This is why we follow a lectionary - we must take to heart the challenging scriptures as we do the easier scriptures. We cannot pick and choose.

The gospel begins today with Jesus saying, “You have heard that it was said, “eye for eye, and tooth for tooth”. Jesus was referring to the

Old Testament – Exodus 21. This “eye for an eye” business was actually seen, at the time, as a balanced approach to retribution. And it was seen as better than other legal systems of the ancient Middle East. Exodus says, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” One Bible scholar says, “Even today, this principle could prove valid in judicial cases: ‘bent fender for bent fender’ – no more and no less. This would restrain malicious revenge and greed.” It ensures that the penalty is not arbitrary, making the punishment more severe than the crime.

Jesus goes on by saying, “but I tell you, do not resist an evil person.” The Contemporary English Version says, “But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you.” Rather, Jesus continues, “if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”

This has always been a confusing scripture for me, and maybe for you, too. We must understand these words in its historical context. If not, we could interpret this as recommending us becoming doormats or tolerating domestic violence. And indeed, this is NOT the case.

Biblical Commentator David Ewart, says the translation, “Do not resist an evildoer” fails to convey the full meaning of the original Greek. It would be better translated as, “Do not *violently* resist an evildoer.”

This makes the teaching more about non-violence, rather than acquiescing to evil.

We also must remember the original society in which Jesus gave these teachings. When Jesus says, “If anyone...” his listeners knew instantly and exactly who that “anyone” was. The behaviors Jesus describes – slapping the right cheek; suing; forcing to go a mile – were not the kind of things just “anyone” could do. They were the kind of things only a privileged few could do.

Slapping the right cheek was done by Masters to their servants. It was always done by hitting with the back of the right hand across the right cheek. The blow was about asserting status and power over the other. It is not about random violence or fighting on the playground. It is about rank, privilege and power.

To maintain your public standing and to preserve your honor, it was imperative for Masters to act within the socially accepted protocols. You must strike your servant only the right cheek; and only with the back of your right hand. Any variation on this would demonstrate that you were not in control and it would be a public loss of face.

Now imagine your master has just slapped you on your right cheek, and without saying a word you silently turn your head to expose your left cheek. It may appear that you are becoming doubly

subservient; doubly accepting your master's authority over you. But, you are actually rendering your master powerless. Turning your head hides your right cheek and presents only your left cheek. The master cannot strike your left cheek with the back of his right hand. His only options would be to hit you with the palm of his right hand, or use his left hand, or walk away. All three would cause him to lose face.

The other examples Jesus gives, suing another and forcing the walk of a mile, also illustrate that these are only things that the privileged would do to abuse the poor. Peasants did not sue one another. Offering to go a second mile exposes the hardship of being forced to go even one mile, but does so in a way that seems to cooperate while at the same time brings shame and ridicule on the ones doing the forcing.

Knowing this historical context can lead one to believe that Jesus is teaching us to humiliate those in power. This is not the case, either. Instead – Jesus questions the notion of power at its core. Who really has the power? Jesus does as he often does – he turns everything upside down and inside out. He acknowledges the law from the Old Testament and offers a new way to approach the world.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew are referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. There's much familiarity in these chapters – the Beatitudes are found in Chapter 5: Blessed are the meek, Blessed are the merciful,

Blessed are the peacemakers. The Lord's Prayer is found in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7 we find the comforting verse, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

But sprinkled in to the Sermon on the Mount are these more challenging scriptures that we're reading today. Why couldn't Jesus have delivered just a simple, uplifting message about how much God loves us and leave it at that? Because Jesus came to teach us that God's love transforms. God's love turns darkness into light. God's love provides a radical re-definition of the old laws and turns it into something new. God's love moves us from RULES to RELATIONSHIPS and it challenges us to think about what kind of people we're going to be.

Jesus again turns the common day law on its ear when he commands us to love our enemies. People then, as we do now, feel justified in hating our enemies – that's why they're our enemies – we don't like them and often times for good reason.

Have you heard the term "restorative justice"? Restorative justice focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and their families.

Don and Mary, they are friends of mine from when I lived in Duluth. In 1991, their daughter, who was 18, disappeared and was later found murdered. I won't go into the details but it was gruesome

and unimaginable. In their journey as husband and wife, as parents, as Christians, as people who were on their knees with grief, they found their way to embracing restorative justice. They have met with their daughter's murderer, more than once. For Don, the act of forgiveness allows a person to separate the deed from the person. It recognizes another person's humanity and possibilities of rehabilitation and backs you away from a need for revenge. Don and Mary went TOWARD their enemy with God's heart, not revenge. It doesn't mean they want the offender to get out of prison; and it doesn't mean the offender shouldn't be punished. But Don and Mary did want Jesus models for us – walk towards your enemy, don't run away from them. Reach out your hand to those you are uncomfortable with. We may be justified to hate – but it's not what Jesus wants for us. Because of our relationship with Jesus, it can transform our relationships with one another. In their despair, in their weakness, Don and Mary walked forward with God's strength, because they had no strength of their own. They, and the offender, have become transformed because of God's teaching to love our enemies. It doesn't mean the offender shouldn't face the consequences and receive the punishment. But it means that Don and Mary don't move forward in their lives full of rage. They leave that rage behind and walk forward, transformed by their relationship in Jesus.

Jesus was and is relational. Jesus spoke to the masses, for sure, but more Bible stories talk about how Jesus came into the life of an INDIVIDUAL and transformed it. And here, our gospel today, encourages us to be that individual who can transform the life of another by showing God's grace and love.

We may have our excuses for why we don't do it. We're so busy – life is different today than it was in Biblical times. But really, was it so different?

When Jesus walked on earth there were class divisions – we have that today; there was rich and poor – we certainly have that today; there were the outcasts and the pious, there was sickness; there were questionable women who were absent of morals and men who couldn't be trusted. These are all problems we encounter today. So indeed the actions of Jesus can be applied to our lives today. In all of Jesus's teachings – he tells us and models to us – go to the other. Enter into their lives – enter into their space. Not only did Jesus GO to the other – he TOUCHED them. He touched the untouchables. He loved the unlovable. Think about the leper – the one no one wanted to touch – Jesus reached out and touched him. The blind man where Jesus touched his eyes – where the blind man needed healing is where Jesus directly laid his hands. The people who are broken around you – where

do they need to be touched? Where do they need God's transformational love? How can you offer it?

Have you ever participated in a foot washing? Maybe you have during a Maundy Thursday service? The first time I did I was 22 doing a year of service with Lutheran Volunteer Corps in Washington DC at a shelter for women who were homeless. There was a worship service where congregation members and homeless women attended together and on this day you could choose to participate in a foot washing. I remember thinking – what? We're taking off our shoes AND socks in church? This is weird. OK, I'll do it but I'm certainly not going to be the first to get up. I sat there – watching, waiting to see who was going to participate and to my surprise many did. And I thought – OK, I'm going to do it – I'm going to force myself to do it. I don't want to be the only one NOT doing it. I was engaged in my nervous thoughts instead of being engaged in thinking about the meaning and symbolism of the act. What if my feet smell? I should have cut my toe nails. Where do I put my shoes? Where do I put my socks? Do I put my socks IN my shoes? Wait, what if THEIR feet smell? Good grief – these thoughts. And then all of a sudden there I was, sitting with my feet in warm water with someone gently rubbing them with a cloth. This felt good. In this completely vulnerable space, with a stranger at my feet, I got why it was important to accept and receive this gift from another. We

connect with one another on a very human yet transcendent level when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

And then it was time for me to wash another's feet. My anxious thoughts had disappeared and I can't even tell you now if the person's feet were dirty, calloused or smelly – all I could think was the gift I was offering and receiving.

Step out of your comfort zone and step into the life of another. It is in that stepping TOWARDS another person that you create a Christ filled relationship – it is that relationship centered in Jesus – that can transform.

I'm Norwegian and I'm Lutheran – that makes me a pretty private person. It's not always comfortable for me to walk TOWARDS another person. We all have our boundaries – we all have our comfort zones. In order to get to a point where we can love our enemies (that seems so extreme) we must simply learn how to step out of our comfort zone. We can all remember a time where we were in a situation when we were confronted by the needs of another person and we held back because we didn't want to interfere or intrude or appear like we're being nosey. We've all had that distant acquaintance who was diagnosed with an illness and we meant to send that card or make that phone call but we didn't gather up the courage to do it. We've all

meant to sign up for that service project or help with that non profit but we just didn't make the time. Or to bring it home a little more, we've all gotten busy in our lives and not said to our kids we're proud of them, or to our spouses that we love them, because we're caught up in the day to day. And these are people we love – if we can't reach out to them how are we going to practice loving our enemies?

When you step TOWARDS another you put yourself in a vulnerable position. It can be unpredictable – we might have to share a piece of ourselves. We're stoic here in Minnesota and we don't often like to do that. What's the Ole and Lena joke? Ole loved Lena so much that he almost told her.

Habitat for Humanity is a Christian ministry that steps TOWARD people and models Christ's love – and sometimes it's uncomfortable. Let me tell you about our Habitat Family Services Committee members who continually step TOWARDS another - and I will tell you it's their faith that compels them to do it. There are a couple of ladies that have been on our committee for several years and I've done many interviews with them in the homes of applicants. When you walk into the home of anyone you don't know well you never know what situations you might encounter. Sometimes it's a neighborhood we're unfamiliar with; or an apartment complex that's unsettling. Sometimes there are little

children who are shy and hide behind mom or dad and sometimes they're bounding into your lap. Sometimes there are pets who also bound into your lap. When you're in someone else's home you see a part of their lives that not everyone else sees. Sometimes you align with it, recognize it, feel comfortable with it – sometimes it's different, uncomfortable, messy, smelly.

But it's this work, compelled by the faith of our committee members that makes Habitat possible. We need to enter the homes of our applicants to get a sense of their need for housing.

And, let's be honest, when we enter in to the lives of people who are low income we bring out own judgment, don't we? Some have had plain old bad luck and that's what's caused their circumstance; others have made bad choice after bad choice and that's what's led them to their circumstance. But Jesus doesn't say help those who deserve it; help those who align with all your values. Jesus doesn't say that.

Jesus says walk towards the other. Walk into the lives of those you are uncomfortable with. Love your enemies. It's radical, really. Bring who you are to Jesus – come to God in your vulnerability – and you will find strength like you've never known.

Let God transform our judgmental thoughts.

Let God transform our hearts and minds.

Who are the enemies in your life? Who do you need to walk towards? God is depending on us to transform our communities, our families, our own lives.

Come. The world's needs are great.

Come. Bring all that you have to the cross.

Come. See what God can do.

Amen.