

“KNOWING JESUS: II - CHALLENGING LEADER”

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Matthew 5:38-45

How many of you here know what a “chick flick” is? A “chick flick” is a movie that women tend to like - a movie that’s usually sappy and warm and fuzzy and in the end, the right guy and the right girl always get together. Well, I love chick flicks - love ‘em. I’ll take a good chick flick any day over an action-adventure movie.

And I’ve seen ‘em all - When Harry Met Sally, Sleepless in Seattle, Maid in Manhattan, Raising Helen. One that I just saw recently again was “While You Were Sleeping.” There’s a great scene in that movie where a father and son are sitting together at the dining room table having a conversation. The family has just gone through some trauma as another son was critically injured, but at this point in the movie he’s recovering nicely. At any rate, the father and the other son are sitting there, and the father says to his son, “You ever have one of those days when everything goes right, everyone’s happy and healthy, and all’s right with the world?” Then, as soon as he says it, the son, who’s preparing to deliver his father some bad news, replies, “Dad, this isn’t one of those days.”

Well, my dear friends, I could say the same thing to you this morning. This isn’t going to be one of those days when everything is sweetness and light, because this morning, in this second sermon in the “Knowing Jesus” series, I’m going to talk about Jesus, as challenging leader. I really could have called it “Knowing Jesus - Radical Leader, or Revolutionary Leader” but even I was scared by those.

Jesus - challenging leader. Just look at today’s Gospel lesson and you’ll instantly know those words, that title, is true. “If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek. If someone sues you, give them everything you’ve got. If someone begs from you, give them something. And oh, that person who hates you and does evil to you, love him or her and pray for them.”

Challenging? To say the least.

These are difficult words of Jesus - difficult because it’s so not the way we do things in our world today. That Old Testament “eye for an eye” stuff is pretty popular these days. So is the inclination to tell the needy to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. When is the last time anyone was encouraged to not strike back, and more than that, love the one who did the striking?

These are challenging words, radical words from the lips of our Lord and Savior. We can't just skip over them and pretend he didn't say them, or pretend he didn't seriously expect us to do those things, much as we might like too. It sure would be easier if Jesus stuck to soft and sweet words, like, say the 23rd Psalm, but that's not who Jesus is.

So let's spend a few moments this morning looking at some of the challenges Jesus throws out to us, as his disciples.

Clearly, one of the things Jesus challenges us, Jesus calls us to do is to seek peace - peace in our relationships, peace in our world. He says it over and over again in so many different ways - "don't strike back, forgive those who hurt you, forgive again and again and again." All of those things lead to peace for us, peace for those with whom we are in relationship, and peace for our society, our world.

Why is it, then, that so often we don't choose peace? So often we do strike back, maybe not physically but verbally or in our actions. So often we don't forgive, holding onto grudges for dear life. Jesus calls us, no, challenges us, as those who say we follow Him, to do otherwise.

He also challenges us to live sacrificially - to think of others before ourselves, and to give of ourselves and our resources until it hurts - really. Look at what he said in this morning's lesson - if someone wants your coat, don't just give him the coat, give him your cloak as well. And if someone begs, give that person what they need.

Oh what a challenge that is, especially in these times when money is tight. I mean, we may want to give, but what about what we need? I don't know about you, but almost everyday, I receive mail asking for a contribution or phone calls asking for money - there's only so much a person can do, isn't there? This call from Christ, this challenge, is a tough one - one that could keep you awake at night. What do you want me to do Lord? Who do you want me to help? How can I do that and take care of me too? (P.S. Nobody said discipleship was going to be easy!)

A third challenge Jesus puts out to us - actually, it sort of encompasses his whole message - is this: live your life, your faith boldly. Live it boldly. All of the things Jesus lifts up in this morning's lesson are bold actions. It's bold to offer someone your other cheek after they've already struck you once. It's bold to take off your coat and your cloak and give it to somebody else, when you could use it too. It's bold to forgive someone who has hurt you, and even bolder to do it again and again. It's bold to look at one who has hurt you, and love them and pray for them. It's bold - bold faith!

But that's what Jesus calls us to have - bold, lively, risky faith - willing to reach out and do what society might say is crazy. It's a scary thing to consider sometimes, isn't it? So scary that perhaps, too often, we don't even try.

I read this week about a young man who, a number of years ago, got a summer job at a logging camp. His mother was pretty worried about how he would make out there. He was a young guy, a faithful Christian, and pretty innocent, and she was more than a little worried about how the rough and tumble loggers there would treat him. She was especially afraid that they would get on him about his Christian faith and life. But, bathed in her prayer, off he went for the summer. At the end of the summer, he returned, and his mother said, "How did it go? Did the men pick on you for being a Christian?" The boy's face brightened and he said, "No, they didn't - they never found out!" (J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Beatitudes from the Backside*, p. 87).

Hmmm . . . Do people know that we are Christians? If someone was going to pick on a faithful, bold, Christian, would you be a target?

I found more evidence than I wanted to this week, a plethora of books and articles, talking about the passivity of too many church-going Christians today. Rather than answering Jesus' challenges to live boldly, and peaceably, and sacrificially, too many of us would rather live comfortably and quietly and passively. One writer said that "most of us, as Christians, have domesticated Christ and his teachings so that a thoughtful observer might confuse Christianity as we live it with almost any pleasant, well-meaning, rather bland, and superficial philosophy of life." (Kalas, p. 97) Ouch!

Another person, a young person who grew up in a church, said there came a point for him where he "began to wonder if anybody still believed Jesus meant those things he said. I thought if we stopped and asked 'What if he really meant it? it could turn the world upside down. It was a shame (he said) Christians had become so normal." (Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 41).

Have we? Have we put Jesus' challenges in the category of historical reading because well, they're just too hard, too uncomfortable for us to take on? Granted, they are hard, they are uncomfortable, there is no denying that, but my friends, they are not impossible.

We saw just how possible some of those things were a while ago in a place not far from here. We saw it in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania where a disturbed man went into an Amish schoolhouse and opened fire on innocent children. I'm in the process of reading an excellent book about it entitled *Amish Grace*, and in that book the authors note that the grace and forgiveness of the Amish people very quickly

eclipsed the story of the schoolhouse slaughter. Do you remember that? Immediately the Amish forgave the shooter, and reached out in loving ways to his widow and children - immediately. It was astounding, and the world was astonished by it.

From the book I learned that the Amish were surprised that the world was surprised by it. "Why is everybody all surprised?" asked one Amish man. "It's just standard Christian forgiveness; it's what everybody should be doing." (Kraybill, Nolt, Weaver-Zucher, *Amish Grace*, p. 49).

Well, it may be what everybody should be doing, but they're not. That's why what they did was so powerful, and in the words of the authors, "the Amish forgiveness . . . and the way it affected the world, did not rob the tragedy of its horror, nor did it eradicate the grief of those left behind. Still, it may have been an answer to Amish prayers that somehow, somewhere, some good would come out of this terrible event." (*Amish Grace*, p. 52).

You see, it can be done. The challenging way Jesus calls us to live can be done, but have no doubt, it is hard. As Dorothy Day once said, "The only thing harder than hatred is love. The only thing harder than war is peace. The only thing that takes more work, tears and sweat than division is reconciliation. But what more beautiful things could we devote our lives to?" (Claiborne, p. 284).

Indeed, so, shall we? Shall we rise to the challenge of the kind of life Christ invites us to live? It won't be easy, people may laugh at us, we may get a bruised cheek occasionally, a cold shoulder because we've given our coats away, less money in our pockets because we've helped someone. It may make us uncomfortable and take us way out of our comfort zones - but it's what Jesus, our challenging leader - calls us to do.

I want to close with something for you to think on as you leave this place. It's an old comic strip that goes like this. There are two guys having a conversation. One of them says to the other that he has a question for God. He wants to ask why God allows all of this poverty and war and suffering to exist in the world. His friend says, "Well, why don't you ask?" The fellow shakes his head and says he is too scared to ask. "Why?" "I'm scared God will ask me the same question." (Claiborne, p. 64).

Dear friends, let us not live in fear of what Jesus the Christ would ask us. Let us rather seek to rise to his challenges to live fully, faithfully and boldly this day and all the days ahead. May it be so.

Amen.