

When my brother Michael and I were kids, we had to deal with a problem that I'm sure many of us have probably had to face at least once in our lives, we had to deal with a troublesome bully. We were probably around 7 or 8 years old at the time, and there was this little boy named Jeff, who lived down the street from us, who was always picking on us. Even though he was a little guy, and there were two of us and only one of him, he would push us around, call us names, give us dead legs, and would pick fights with us whenever he saw us playing in the neighborhood.

Well, one day my brother and I decided that we had had enough, and it was time to get even, it was time to get our revenge. It happened during the Fall, because I remember that my dad had built a nice bonfire in our backyard to burn the leaves that he had raked up around our property. With our blood boiling and our faces flushed with anger we grabbed two croquet mallets from our garage and placed them in the blazing yard waste to light them. Once lit we grabbed our flaming weapons, hopped on our big wheels, and like a mob of villagers with pitchforks and torches pursuing a monster, we chased little Jeff down the street all the way back to his house.

Although our solution probably wasn't the best way to change our relationship with Jeff, we were young and let our emotions get the best of us. Now it may seem impossible, especially after our little chase, but I should point out that eventually my brother and I became friends with Jeff. We found out some things we had in common and the more we demonstrated kindness to him the more his meanness faded away.

As I'm sure you are well aware, there are all sorts of bullies out there aren't there, we might even call them enemies? The neighborhood bully, the tough guy, or the jock, who picks on the little guy, the co-worker who will do anything to get ahead, the kid at school that likes to steal lunch money. Maybe we encounter these

types of individuals in real life, maybe we don't, but we do spot them in movies and on T.V. Such as: Biff Tannen from the movie Back to the Future, Regina George played by Rachel McAdams in Mean Girls, the Coonskin cap wearing Scut Farkus in A Christmas Story, Sue Sylvester from the tv show Glee and Blair Woldorff from Gossip Girl.

Now despite the existence of bullies, or people who we tend to label as our enemies, in his instructions to his newly called disciples, and to the crowd of people who were listening to him preach his Beatitudes sermon, Jesus tries to help them understand that God expects them, and us, to live on a much higher plane than the lost people of the world who return good for good and evil for evil. Those who love God, especially those who claim be Christian, are to return good for evil as investments of love!

After all, as followers of Christ we are aware that life is about relationships, our relationship with God and our relationship with others. And in our Gospel this morning from Luke Jesus is trying to teach those gathered before him a lesson on how to be perfected in God's love! In fact, you might say he was trying to correct certain misperceptions involving an individual's interaction with others that distorted the purpose of God's law, which was established to create a covenant of how the people were to treat God and one another.

Jesus' preaching to the crowd was meant to help guide them back to an understanding of the original purpose and intent of the law. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your shirt as well; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again."

In a world accustomed to an eye for an eye, this is a whole new way of responding to an attack. As you can imagine, when I was growing up, I had my own misunderstanding of an eye for an eye. I always heard it used as a way to

justify seeking vengeance or retaliation on those that hurt us, especially in cases like the death penalty... Yet, it was originally designed to protect people from going beyond getting even, it kept people from forcing the offender to pay a greater price than the offense deserved. For example: if someone accidentally killed your donkey, then you could take their donkey, but you weren't allowed to take their donkey, their sheep, and a cow as well.

When people are hurt in some way, we tend to react by either fighting back, or we flee or try to hide from the world, so we don't get hurt again. In his teaching for today Jesus adds another way for us to respond and that response involves love! This reaction can be more effective than a flight to safety, or a fight that could turn into a never-ending battle, but it requires real bravery and commitment! It is a different kind of love, completely cuff off from our warm and fuzzy valentine's day feelings or that new relationship love we experience during the honeymoon phase of a newly formed couple. No...the love that our Lord lifts up this morning is grounded in a deep determination to respond to danger by acting in a Christ like way.

Now, at first, Jesus' expectations and his words sound rather odd, especially when we consider that he is telling us to respond to danger with love! Another way of understanding this is that Jesus is insisting that love does not retaliate! According to Eugene Boring a New Testament scholar, "Jesus calls for his disciples to reject absolutely the principle of retaliatory violence." This response makes no sense unless you see it in the context of the kingdom of God! In his heavenly kingdom, enemies are embraced and turned into friends, not rejected and put to death."

In our gospel story at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is offering the crowd, and us, a glimpse at what he will do on the cross through his words. He will offer up the other cheek, he will offer up his shirt and his coat, he will go the

extra mile! Jesus lives his life on earth beyond our understanding of an eye for an eye! He was innocent, yet was beaten, flogged, spat upon. If that wasn't enough, he suffered the agony of having nails driven into his hands and suffered a painful execution through crucifixion!

So... let me ask you, does Jesus retaliate? Does he try to get even or seek revenge? Of course, as Christians we know the answer to this, but let me remind you of Jesus prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." Jesus forgives all those people who were responsible in some way for him ending up on that cross, his friends, his enemies, and even us!

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also," says Jesus. In other words, through your actions demonstrate that you are a follower of the Prince of Peace! If anyone wants your coat, give your shirt as well." Show the world that you find your security in God, not in material possessions." "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" – Make it a point to help others as the Lord has helped you." After all, love doesn't retaliate; instead, it seeks the welfare of the other person, even if that person is an evildoer. By responding with nonviolence, generosity, and helpfulness, we stand a chance of leading someone closer to God's kingdom.

You may recall the powerful example of forgiveness offered by an Amish Community in Pennsylvania a number of years ago. A troubled man from a neighboring town took a rifle to a nearby Amish school, shot and killed several children and turned the gun on himself. The close-knit community that experienced the tragedy was in shock. Yet they did not let anger consume them, nor did they seek to condemn the man who had caused them such heartache. No, instead the Amish families chose to reach out in compassion to the man's wife and family—offering their prayers, food, and financial support. And in offering a Christ-like

response to such a tragedy they found healing for themselves, and also showed the world that they lived and acted on what they believed.

Today Jesus gives us a response to adversity that is connected closely to the kingdom of God, which makes sense because he begins his Sermon by listing off the attitudes of individuals who belong to the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers...” Jesus challenges us to love our enemies, not because they are wonderful people who deserve to be loved, but because they are children of God – we are to love them because God loves them. After all, says Jesus, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Then Jesus raises the stakes a little higher, if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? That’s an easy kind of love, even dishonest tax collectors do the same. If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” Jesus reminds us that as his children, as his disciples we are called to go above and beyond in how we live out our lives, especially in how we live out his love in our World! And with the power of his spirit in our lives, and after experiencing his love in our lives, we can!!!

You might even say that if we can learn to forgive others, if we can learn to avoid seeking vengeance against those, we believe to be our enemies, or the bullies in our lives like little Jeff who was chased down the street by two twin boys with smoking croquet mallets, then we will understand the kind of love God is offering us. To be complete in our love means that we don’t just keep it for our neighbors, friends, and family! It means we are to serve God wholeheartedly, focusing on the standards of God’s kingdom, as we seek to fulfill the spirit of the law and to imitate our loving father who loves both the righteous and the unrighteous, who blesses all people good and bad. AMEN

