

Sermon for Sunday, February 12, 2017

CHILDREN OF GOD

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matthew 5:9)." The seventh beatitude rolls easily off the tongue and rests comfortably upon the heart. Who does not long for and love peace? Who does not desire to be a child of God, favored by God's presence, embraced by God's love, and guided and comforted by God's Spirit? We hear the seventh beatitude and nod approvingly, its truth falling sweetly upon our hearts like a drop of golden honey on our tongue. God favors those who are meek and pure of heart, who suffer for righteousness sake, who struggle to be merciful. And then, just when we are feeling pretty good about ourselves, and about what Robert Schuller called the "be happy attitudes," Jesus tell us what it really means to be a child of God—with hard sayings about anger, lust, divorce, and lying—and knocks us on our heels.

These are harsh sayings from the lips of Jesus, painful sayings. Does he really expect us to abide by them, to pluck out our eye and chop off our hand if they should cause us to sin? Or is this an impossible ideal that is meant to remind us that our only hope is to rely on God's mercy and forgiveness? Or was Jesus describing an interim ethic that was meant to be obeyed only for a brief period before the immanent end of time? We can go round and round with these questions. I do. But the real issue set before us by the beatitudes and the hard sayings of the Sermon on the Mount is this: "What does it mean to be a child of God?" "What does it mean to be a child of God?"

Put simply, a child of God is one who is growing up under the tutelage and in the shadow of God's holiness through faith. It is a person who is doing God's work, like Jesus did, in spite of suffering, ridicule and persecution. It is a person growing into Christ-likeness, into one who suffers for the sake of others, who forgives for the sake of reconciliation, and who loves unconditionally for the sake of redemption. It is a person striving to live into Christ, the perfect child of God, not in order to be perfect in him or herself—which is not possible—but in order to be in a perfect relationship of faith with God.

What Jesus does with the beatitudes, and in these hard sayings about the new righteousness expected of God's children, is give shape and expression to the discipleship displayed by God's children.

For instance, the seventh beatitude declares that peacemakers are favored with God's blessing. In Hebrew thought, peace does not mean only the absence of conflict. Instead peace means that which makes for another person's complete well-being. Peace is shalom, the enjoyment of all good, especially in relationship with God and others.

It's important in listening to Jesus, to understand the difference between peace-makers, peace-lovers, and peace-keepers.

Peace-keepers maintain an absence of conflict by means of threats and fear. In Jesus' day, the Roman soldiers garrisoned in Israel were peacekeepers. Today, the United Nations' troops are peacekeepers. They prevent conflict, or limit it, by being armed to the teeth. It's an uneasy peace. Those of you who lived in the 70's will remember the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction, MAD for short, which characterized our country's relationship with the Soviet Union. Both countries refrained from fighting because of the equal threat of nuclear annihilation. Whenever we try to prevent conflict with the threat of punishment or retaliation, be it on our city streets, in our families, in our churches, or wherever, we are engaged in peace-keeping, which though realistic, practical, and effective, is not favored by God.

Peace-lovers, on the other hand, avoid conflict altogether. They evade issues and evade others with whom they are in disagreement. Nothing is ever resolved; it's just swept under the rug. There is no reconciliation, and no restored relationships. Tragically, instead of your community of friends and neighbors expanding, it slowly shrinks as you drift away from those with whom you have crossed swords. Of course, not every disagreement warrants wholesale attempts at resolution or reconciliation. But we all know of times we've left something go too long, or of persons we never reconciled with because we feared the discomfort and effort of making peace.

Peace-makers work for peace. They pursue the resolution of conflicts, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the other. They make peace to restore strained or severed relationships and to continue the process of building the community of God's shalom. They actively seek out those whom they have wronged to apologize. They actively seek out those who have wronged them in order to understand them. They actively seek out a process by which they can resolve conflict. They listen, apologize, and set pride and self aside for the sake of a higher good. In so doing, they

engage themselves in a Christ-like work, for it is the great purpose of God to reconcile us to Godself through Christ, and to reconcile us one to another. So children of God are makers of peace, as God is a maker of peace. They don't just talk the talk. They walk the walk. It's hard to be a peace-maker, but Jesus never promised us an easy way; he only promised us a holy way.

Children of God are also those who seek to be good as God is good. Remember when Jesus said to the rich young ruler, "Why do you call me good? Only God is good. In all humility, Jesus was saying, "Don't pursue my goodness. Pursue God's goodness, because that is what I pursue."

The faithful whom Jesus addressed, believed that you were good if you adhered to the Law. We still think that way. If you've never broken the law, committed a crime, or been arrested, nor involved yourself in morally depraved activity, you're basically a good person. But the pursuit of one's own sense of goodness and righteousness leads us away from the Kingdom. It makes us self-righteous, judgmental, legalistic, prejudicial, and critical. We become concerned with our rights, and with our freedom, more than with everyone's rights and everyone's freedom.

Jesus reminds us that children of God are bound not simply by the limits of the Law, but by the spirit of God's selfless love. So it is not enough to refrain from those obvious actions which destroy community, like murder, adultery, divorce, and lying. We are called to engage in those actions that build community, that strengthen relationships, that respect the needs of others, and that build trust. A person is not a child of God because he or she never did a forbidden thing. A person is only a child of God as he or she pursues in his or her thoughts and actions, God's righteous will through faith. Jesus put it this way: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20)."

So to pursue God's goodness, as demonstrated in Christ, is to live into God's kingdom. It's not only to refrain from murder, and to refrain from anger, insults and disrespect of others, but is to be so concerned about the needs and rights of the other that you actively pursue reconciliation with them. It's not only to refrain from adultery, and to acknowledge that your lust is dehumanizing of women and men and yourself, but is to pursue their good even at great physical cost to oneself. It's not merely to abide by the legalities of divorce, but is, in the midst of divorce, to be concerned about the other's future, the other's reputation, and the other's well-being. And it's not only to refrain from oaths, which imply that one's word is not quite good enough, but is to so live that one's word is trusted and trustworthy, that one's "Yes" means "Yes" and one's "No" means "No."

Finally, children of God know themselves as blessed by God's undeserved grace. They are makers of peace, and pursue God's goodness, not because they are trying to earn God's favor, but because they know they have been gifted with it. They feel no need to protect their rights, because their rights have been protected by God. They feel no need to build up and preserve their egos, because they know that God loves them in spite of what anyone else may say or do. They have no need for power, because they live in the power of God, no need for riches because their treasure is God's love, no need for security because they trust in the Lord. God's grace has transformed them into new creatures with new hearts, who walk in the footsteps of the perfect child of God, Jesus Christ. And though their discipleship is wanting and they know it, they also know that God will see them through their failures to the Promised Land of heavenly communion.

So children of God are makers of peace. They seek to be good as God is good for the sake of community. They know themselves as blessed by God's grace. They do not retaliate, hate, curse, lust, swear, brag, preen, worry, or backbite because it is not in the nature of God or what God intends for them to be like.¹ They are those who are living into the kingdom of heaven, into the kingdom of peace, harmony, love, faithfulness, and worship that is coming.

Once there was a child of God named Jesus who was a peacemaker, who sought to be good as God is good, who lived in the blessing of God's grace. The new creation was his life. Blessed be those who, by the Spirit's leading, follow him. Truly they are his sisters and brothers, children of Almighty God.

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Matthew 5: 21-37

¹ Richard Lischer, *Interpretation*, April 1987, p. 163.