

Lately I've been unable to get Jesus' beatitudes out of my mind; those challenging, yet somehow comforting portraits of what God's promised Kingdom looks like. Who can debate the stunning beauty of Jesus' words?

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit...for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven
Blessed are those who mourn... for they shall be consoled.
Blessed are the meek... for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are the peacemakers... for they will be called children of God."*

Well, you get the picture here. A picture of an alternative future: A future marked not by poverty and oppression but by justice and shalom; A future where no one is ever in need again; A future in which those who work for peace enjoy the most intimate identity with their creator – children of God. In his big sermon, which goes on for two chapters in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us that

We are "salt" – meant to preserve life.

We are "light" – meant to venture into dark places.

Jesus even dispels the old "sticks and stones" nursery rhyme by telling us that not only can words hurt me, but they can and they WILL kill me! Okay, I get it: Jesus gives us a beautiful view of a transformed future, but not first without pushing our comfort zones.

In almost 30 years of preaching Jesus, I've come to expect a bit of this. I've even become accustomed to having my faith furniture moved around from time to time, but what I've never been able to get completely used to is what Jesus tells us in these beatitudes. Every single time I hear these words, I get tripped up and stumble. It's like I can't walk and chew my Jesus-bubble gum at the same time.

"You have heard it said, love your neighbors 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" (Matthew 5:44).

Hold on Jesus. You mean to tell me that if I don't love my enemies, I'm not a child of God? Folks I'm looking for the escape clause here: I'm looking for the place right after this verse, where Jesus says, "I'm just kidding. Go ahead and hate your enemies, you're better than them anyway". Or, "Love your enemies? That's just some out of this world ideal that I don't possibly expect you to live out. Carry on, business as usual..."

But he doesn't say that. And that's what trips me up every time. Tell me that I need to love my enemies because hatred and negativity are bad for my mental and physical health. Tell me I need to love my enemies because spending energy hating them gives them power over me. Tell me to love my enemies because God will reward me for being the better person. Tell me to love my enemies because, as Paul points out in one of my favorite texts on this subject, [Romans 12:20](#), being kind to my enemies is a way to "heap burning coals on their heads." Now that's motivating!

But Jesus doesn't offer any of these commonsense motivators. All Jesus says is that we are to practice non-resistance when personally insulted and to love our enemies because that is in keeping with the character of God. If we are looking for practical, positive motivations to act in these odd and counter-cultural ways of Jesus, there are no words that can convince. There is only this: He who taught us the prayer during his life, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" prays "Father, forgive them," as he hangs dying on a cross.

I guess that's what gives Jesus the authority to not back down on that love of enemies thing: Whether they be enemies on the other side of the world, or the person you can barely even look at on the other side of the church pew.

Here's the thing: Jesus is not looking for more members here at Incarnate Word. If I'm reading my Bible right, he's looking for more disciples. Those who will follow him with every fiber of their being: Those who will follow him across all boundaries into a world addicted to hate and vengeance offering an alternative vocabulary of love and forgiveness.

In this "stand your ground" world where I can preemptively attack you before you attack me, every single one of us who would be called child of God, stands under a different mandate: Given by the One who uttered words of forgiveness while hanging on a cross of hate: "Love your enemies. No exceptions".

In the cross of Christ, God did not settle in to a comfort zone. God did not offer the escape clause that says this cross-thing is just theoretical.

In the cross of Christ, an instrument of torture and hate was transformed into a symbol of love.

In the cross of Christ, God's holy imagination stopped at nothing to shatter boundaries with overwhelming love: Love for all....

In light of this cross, from which love was poured out in abundance, how can we do any less?

Peace and Love (for all)
Pastor Doug

