

New Ways and Old Superlatives

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 5:43-48

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In the summers that I would spend in SC as a kid, one of the things I loved to do was to go with my brother King and my father down to Main Street in downtown Columbia. On Main Street in those days, there were two places King and I really loved to visit. The first was the Army-Navy surplus store, and the second was a place called Cromer's. The Army Navy surplus store is still there, or at least it was the last time I checked, but Cromer's is no longer on Main Street. Now, Cromer's is like an old five and dime. They sell Halloween costumes, candy, toys, playing cards, magic tricks and popcorn. But what Cromer's specializes in is peanuts. In fact, the store is called *Cromer's Peanuts*. And on every bag they sell, Cromer's has their famous slogan: "The Worst Peanuts in Town."

Now everyone in Columbia knows that in calling their peanuts the worst in town, Cromer's is being ironic. Their slogan, you might say is a parody of what most people do with their slogans which is to call their product or service the best, the most delicious, the fastest, the most affordable. Most people in advertising their product or service, in other words, like to use superlative adjectives, but let's just call them "superlatives" for short. Best, greatest, fastest, neatest, sweetest, these are all superlatives, and superlatives are so common in advertising that when someone calls their product or service the worst in town, it sticks in your memory. It gets your attention. And I suppose I am proof of that. If you would ask me the slogan of any other business, I'm not sure I could remember it, but how could I forget the slogan "the worst in town"?

Well, I am talking about these superlatives today, because many times before I have preached sermons on the idea that God is not like us. God, I have said many times before is different from us. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” the Lord says in the book of Isaiah. But just *how* is God different from us, you may wonder. Well, I think many of us think of God as a superlative of us, a superlative of all of our ideas of goodness and decency and respectability.

Years ago, back when they had record stores, you may remember how they would have records on display that were “the best of”: *The Best of Paul McCartney* or *The Best of Fleetwood Mac* or *The Best of Michael Jackson*. And these were records where they’d get rid of all the songs that nobody likes and that the artists didn’t even like for that matter and be left with some pure collection of those songs everyone liked. Well, that’s how I think many people think of God. They think of God, that is, as being the collection of our best, or what we think of as the best.

Well, the idea that God is the superlative of our ideas of goodness and decency and respectability runs up against a certain problem in today’s gospel reading. But it runs up against a problem you wouldn’t notice I don’t think if you weren’t paying close attention to what you heard. This passage from the gospel of Matthew is a small quote taken out of a larger sermon from Jesus and that sermon is commonly known as *The Sermon on the Mount*. Well, there is something Jesus says in today’s reading which is a constant refrain in that sermon, and that is the words “You have heard it said”—and this phrase “You have heard it said” always seems to precede some kind of wise saying, some wise proverb that is the kind of thing you would have grown up hearing your uncle Ted or aunt Ruth say all the time—sayings and proverbs like “You

can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink" or "The early bird catches the worm" or "Two's company but three's a crowd." And these kinds of proverbs are so common that Jesus doesn't need to say "Have you ever heard this?" or "Have you heard this said?" because everyone knows that everyone has heard these things. And each of these sayings, each of these sayings which come from uncle Ted or aunt Ruth contain common ideas of what it means to be a good and decent person, a respectable person. But with each of these sayings, with each of these "You have heard it said" phrases, Jesus has a new teaching, as he says to his disciples, "You have heard it said, but I say to you."

"You have heard it said 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you 'If you are angry with your brother or sister you are liable to judgment.' You have heard it said 'You shall not commit adultery' but I say to you 'Whoever looks on a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' You have heard it said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', but I say to you 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other.'"

I don't know about you, but what I hear in each of these "But I say to you" statements is not that God is superlative, it is not that God is the best or the greatest of our ideas, but God sent Jesus to give us completely new ideas. "Despite what you have heard," Jesus says, "despite what you have heard all your life in these wise old sayings, I have a new idea, I am here to teach you a new way."

In today's lesson, we have one of those new ways. The Lord says "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor 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.' For he

makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Now, if you were looking for the best of what we have to offer, the best of our ideas of goodness and decency, would you really expect to find someone who prays for their enemies? I know of pastors who've gotten in a lot of trouble for praying for Saddam Hussein during the last two wars this country has fought, praying for Hitler during the Second World War or praying for Ho Chi Minh during the Vietnam War. That isn't our idea of goodness, that isn't our decency. In fact, you might even say that someone who prays for those people is disloyal, they're a traitor. But Christ shows what God is like by offering us a new idea, not a superlative idea, a new direction, not a collection of our greatest hits.

If you are serious about following the new way that Christ offers, the new way that says not "You have heard it said", but rather "I say to you", sooner or later you will get into a problem. This new way that you follow will sometimes be confused with the way of sin and darkness rather than goodness and light. And the reason for that, I think should be pretty clear. If you go against our own ideas of righteousness in order to be truly righteous, you will look unrighteous as far as the world is concerned. And so, if you love your enemy you can be confused with a traitor. If you turn the other cheek, you can be confused with a coward. If you do not put your faith on a stage, you may be accused of having no faith at all. But do not allow those who are confused to confuse you. Remember who you are. Remember that the old ways of the world have been crucified with Christ, and in our baptisms God has claimed us for new life and a new way.

When I was teaching a college class one semester, I was always coming in to teach after someone else used my classroom, and this nameless, faceless person I did not know used to do

this thing that really annoyed me. I would come into class and all the desks that I expected to be in nice neat little rows and columns were all put into a circle. Now obviously there was some kind of important discussion going on where everyone was supposed to be facing each other, and so the instructor thought the best thing to do was to place the desks in a circle. Now, I didn't see anything wrong with that. I too had put the chairs in a circle for a discussion from time to time, but after I did that I had the students put the desks back. Because you can't really lecture when everyone is seated in a circle and facing each other instead of facing you, and so, if I had my students put their desks in a circle, for the sake of the next person using the class, I had them put the desks back. So, naturally, I thought the person before me should do the same for me. I thought it would be nice, I thought it would be courteous if the person who was using the class before me also had his students put the desks back where they belonged. So about the first four times when I came into class and found the desks in a circle, I got another student to help me put all the desks back, but I didn't say anything, but finally at about the fifth time after this happened, I had had enough. As my students were gathering in the room I blurted out "I can't believe how rude this person who teaches the class before me is. I can't believe they don't put the desks back the way they belong." Well, to that, one of my more outspoken students, one of my wiser students, said, "Umm, excuse me, Mr. Holmes, but how do they belong?"

I said, "Well, what do you mean? What do you mean 'How do they belong?' They belong in nice little rows and columns where they're all facing the board."

"Well, why?"

Well, as I started to answer this student, it suddenly occurred to me, I didn't know why. I wanted to say "Because the rows and columns way is the way class is supposed to be." But what made that the way class is supposed to be? Maybe in the mind of the person in there before me, having the desks all in a circle was the way class was supposed to be. You see, all this time, I wanted this person to apologize to me for rearranging all the desks according to a way they were not supposed to be, but suddenly I found myself seeing things in a new way. Maybe this person didn't owe me an apology at all.

Well, that was when I was at South Carolina, but I also want to tell you about something I discovered at Malone. When you walk the halls of the building where I teach at Malone, you will find that there is a map on the wall of the world. And as you pass this map, the first thing that you will say to yourself is someone put that map upside down. But as you look at the map more closely, you realize that even though the map appears upside down, all the writing on the map is right side up, you don't have to stand on your head to read words like Canada, China, Greenland and so forth. And so the next thing you say to yourself is that the map is deliberately placed upside down. But then the third thing you realize is that it isn't placed upside down at all. It is just that the southern part of the world, or the southern hemisphere is on the top, and the Northern hemisphere is on the bottom. Now, it is natural for you to say to yourself that's upside down, but the only reason you say things that way is because every map you've ever seen in your life has the northern hemisphere on top and the southern hemisphere on the bottom. But why should the north be on top and the south be on the bottom. After all, when you go out into outer space there is no top and bottom of outer space, it is all just out there. It is just an arbitrary choice to say that the north should be on top. But you know what else, not

only is it an arbitrary choice, but I'm not altogether sure that it's a harmless choice. What is on top is usually seen as superior, isn't it? The top dog, the top brass, the top of the line, and the bottom is seen as inferior, isn't it? He's a real bottom feeder, we say, or we say you have to start out at the bottom and work our way up. Well, if that's the case, do you think it is any coincidence that with some exceptions such as China and Australia, the Northern part of the world is generally the richest part of the world and the southern part is where so much of the poverty and suffering is? Do you think it is any coincidence that again, with some exceptions, the northern part of the world has usually been where the imperial powers are and the southern part has been where the colonies are? What if we saw things differently? What if we were oriented differently?

You see, that is what Christ does for us, he cause us to see things in a new way. "You have heard it said this way, but this what I say to you. You have heard the way of rows and columns, but I say to you, 'Behold the circle!'" You have heard it said the north is on the top and the south is on the bottom, but I say to you, behold this new map of the world.

Not the best of our ways, but a new way. Are you following a God who is the best, the superlative of all of our ideas, or are you following one who nails all our old ideas to the cross, for the sake of new life in our risen Lord?