

***“Those Surprising People of God”***  
**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – February 19, 2017 – Matthew 5:38-48**

Today as we close out the season of Epiphany, we are also closing out our time with the Sermon on the Mount - Jesus’ foundational teaching – Chapter 5 in Matthew’s Story. “His Four Point Discipleship Plan” begins with the Beatitudes (blessings,) moves on to call us Salt and Light, remind us of what righteous living looks like, and today, will conclude with a call to perfection...Easy, right? Anybody can follow those simple steps. So, let’s take a moment to ponder just what it is God expects from us.

But, first, let me ask you a question: ***What If There is No Heaven?*** That is the question that came crashing into my head like a wave, as I drove to what would prove to be my final visit to my father. ***What if there is no heaven***, and this is all there is? Now, I’m confident Jesus will make good on his promise of eternal life, but the impact of that question made me evaluate, and continue evaluating what is foundational to my discipleship.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he says, *“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it...and that foundation is Jesus Christ.”* So we get to choose how we’ll live as disciples of Jesus the Christ - But Jesus is, and has laid out, our foundation: The Sermon on the Mount. Beatitudes – God sets forth a *vision for the world*; Salt and Light – we *already ARE* what God needs us to be; Righteousness plays out through our *faithfulness*, and as we embrace our identity we become part of God setting things right.

So, let’s look more closely at how Jesus was setting things right. He started, re-interpreting the foundation of Judaism, which was the Torah, the Law. *“You Have Heard that it was said, ‘an Eye for an eye’ but I Say...”* Now, the law, the original rules were given while God formed a people, and rules exist so that people can live together in community. So, please note that Jesus was not RELAXING the former Laws, he was calling us to an even HIGHER standard - so we could be known as those Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called, ***“surprising people.”*** We might call it “great expectations” and here are a few examples:

***Example #1 - “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”*** With a majority of humanity being right handed, the only way you could be slapped on the right cheek is if the person facing you had given you a slap with the back of their hand, a way to illustrate a differential in power. Jesus is saying that *“turning the other cheek”* means you should regain your footing and stand with dignity in front of your assailant, leaving your other cheek vulnerable, surprisingly, and let the community see. ***(Sidebar for this example) “Do not resist evildoers”*** has been misused to allow abuse of power to victimize. Jesus is not telling anyone to “take it” – but to bring forth their own power into the open – to be seen.

***Example #2 - “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well”*** In ancient times, your coat was the basic body garment. The cloak was the outer wear used for protection against the elements and for cover when sleeping. A cloak was so valuable that it could be used as collateral in legal proceedings, but it would be returned to the owner each night so that he would have a bed, and then brought back to the court in the morning. Therefore, if someone sues for your coat and you give up your cloak as well – well, that pretty much leaves you naked, “surprise!” – if you choose not to be powerless in the face of power, the community sees. As we’ve been seeing lately, the power of the people is a force to be reckoned with. And ***loving your enemies*** will surprise no one more than your enemies themselves.

Finally, ***“Be Perfect, as Your Heavenly Father is Perfect.”*** Yeah, right. When the words

seem to call us to outlandish demands, I have learned to always check the original language and the translation. In this case, I'd check the Greek, and find that the word "perfect," comes from the root word, **telos** "in the fullness of time" – in other words, *completed, fulfilled*. **Whole**.

And doesn't every yin need a yang? God doesn't distinguish between weeds and wheat; to God, they are simply lovely creations that grow, that require rain and sun and other things created...And you are not whole - you are incomplete – without the others – the weeds and wheat in this life.

So Jesus asks for the "default setting" of our hearts to be **Shalom** - peace, wholeness, perfection - for us and for others. Jesus asks us to be: **"Surprising people"** who pay back debts in even measure. Who do not allow another's strike to start a war. Who give not only what is needed but more. Who go the extra mile. Who give to those who do not have, and who share with joy. Jesus is suggesting that we, the people of the Kingdom of God are DIFFERENT – we think differently, we act differently. THAT is God's expectation of us. That is Jesus' hope for us.

Setting things right (the work of Discipleship) is hard work, I won't lie to you. C.S. Lewis said, *"Everyone agrees loving enemies, forgiving people are great ideas - until they are confronted with an actual enemy or real-life hurt."* On that I bet we'd all agree. As well as agreeing to this: **"Setting things right" cannot be done in isolation.** We cannot do this work by ourselves, on our own. But as we grow and build our lives as disciples, we catch the vision of the Kingdom of God as we are becoming more and more a part of God's community, and less and less rugged individual - more and more willing to love and let go; and less and less interested in judgment and winning. That's what Jesus was teaching. That's what Jesus was living, and that is why he would die.

The day I began to ponder, *What if there is no heaven?* I began discovering what it's like to use the only life I have, to try to surprise folks for God. Because we are God's temple - WE are the holy place where God's Spirit dwells, in homes we are building on Jesus the Rock. And Heaven is not our motivation – it is simply our final resting place. AMEN.

Pastor Susan Langhauser  
Advent Lutheran Church  
Olathe, KS.