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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Epiphany 7

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, in the pages of the New Testament our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ describes a STRANGE kind of justice.

In the New Testament our Lord Jesus sets forth a sort of justice that is MOST PECULIAR.

Indeed, in the New Testament Jesus presents a type of justice that at first glance just doesn't make any sense.

Jesus says to his disciples, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt."

Our Lord tells us to "love your enemies, do good towards them, and lend to them, expecting nothing in return."

PAUSE

Now, this passage from Luke's gospel is part of what is called in Luke's gospel, "The Sermon on the Plain."

And it has certain parallels with "The Sermon on the Mount" found in Matthew's gospel.

Indeed in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says similar words as those found here in Luke.

Only Matthew relates that Jesus prefaced his remarks with these words, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'"

You have heard it said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...' So on and so forth.

I bring up Matthew's version of this passage, because it helps us understand what Jesus is doing in both "The Sermon on the Plain" and "The Sermon on the Mount."

And that is this. Jesus is redefining "justice."

For you see, in the ancient Jewish world, even before the life and ministry of Jesus here on this earth...

In the ancient Jewish world, justice among God's people was understood as reciprocity.

What you did to me, I am allowed to do to you. But then the violence is supposed to end there.

If you gouge out my eye, I am allowed to gouge out your eye.

If you knock out my tooth, I am allowed to knock out your tooth.

If you take the life of one of my family members, I am allowed to take the life of one of your family members.

But that is where the violence ends.

In other words, as strange as it may sound, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life," was actually meant to demonstrate mercy and compassion.

It was meant to be merciful, because the hope was that the potential for continued ongoing violence would be defused, circumvented, and cut off.

Such words—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life—were conceived in response to feuds that likely erupted between families antiquity, probably not unlike the Hatfields and the McCoys of more recent times.

One family suffered some violence by the hand of another family, and so that violated family perpetrated violence of their own in response, to which then that family, which had first committed violence, reacted with still more violence, so on and so on and so on.

The cycle would go on *ad infinitum*.

So, the authorities of the Bible said if harm is done to you or to your family, you had the right to exact similar harm in return, but then it stops there.

PAUSE

Now global politics has a similar sense of justice.

When some foreign nation does something “provocative” toward the United States, our government leaders speak of a “proportionate response.”

A “proportionate response” is nice way of saying we are exacting an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life.

PAUSE

But then, sisters and brothers in Christ...but then we have Jesus, who doesn't subscribe to this kind of justice.

Jesus doesn't believe in an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Jesus doesn't believe in a “proportionate response.”

No, Jesus' sense of justice is much more radical.

He tells his disciples, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you.”

Now, when it comes to global politics, I'm not sure how we go about this kind of radical justice.

I mean when one nation, like the nation of Russia would seem to be begging to engage in war with another country like the Ukraine, I'm not sure how we go about practicing Jesus' radical justice.

In this instance, are we really called to love the likes of Russia, and to do good towards Russia?

Or when one nation, like Nazi Germany annexed other nations like Poland and the Czech Republic, and initiated a World War, and in the process began exterminating millions of innocent people, I am not sure how we go about practicing Jesus' radical justice.

Was the world supposed to love Nazi Germany, and to do good towards Nazi Germany?

That seems terribly difficult, if not all but impossible.

## PAUSE

Perhaps, though, if we were to start from smaller examples, the power of Jesus' radical justice would flow up to bear influence in global situations.

Perhaps, the power of Jesus' radical justice just needs to start within smaller communities.

Perhaps, Jesus' radical justice just needs to take root in relationships among small groups of people, and it will percolate upwards.

Perhaps, if Jesus' radical justice were to take hold within the church...

That would be at least a beginning.

Because if the church is nothing else, it is meant to be an example of how people are supposed to live in relationship with one another.

Unfortunately, the church often falls way short of the expectations of a ideal community.

It was true even in the apostle Paul's day.

It was true that even in Paul's day, the church was at odds within itself.

Take the case in point of the church in Corinth.

And I know I have shared this example before in a sermon, but it bears worth reiterating.

To be sure, I remind you that there was so much conflict among the Christian believers in ancient Corinth, that some members were even taking their fellow Christians to civil court.

And Paul is so upset by this that he says to the Corinthians, "To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you."

Why does Paul say this?

Why does Paul say that to bring a lawsuit against a fellow Christian means to suffer defeat already?

Because even if you win the lawsuit you have lost the relationship with that brother or sister.

To choose to fight is to choose to lose.

To choose to fight is a defeat because it tears at the fabric of community.

For how can a relationship continue to exist when one person exults in being justified and victorious in court, while another has been shamed and humbled in court.

So Paul asks the Christians in Corinth, "Is it not better to be defrauded? It is not better to be wronged?"

Because then at least the relationships between yourself and your fellow Christians might continue to exist.

And this Pauline philosophy of allowing yourself to be defrauded and wrong is not so different from Jesus' radical justice whereby we are to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you."

Same general message.

Which is what? To do what is necessary for the sake of relationship.

PAUSE

And to that end, for me anyway, I keep coming back to the advice I heard not so long ago with respect to caring for relationship.

Here is the advice, which hopefully you have heard me espouse before.

Give no offense. Take no offense. Pass along no offense.

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Let me expand upon these words.

The first is give no offense.

Giving no offense means, of course, that we are careful not to insult, attack, demonize, or otherwise demean other persons.

It is certainly okay for us to have our opinions, but sometimes when expressing our opinions, we might come off as less than humble or kind.

Sometimes we voice our opinions so as to appear confrontational, combative, and aggressive.

Maybe we don't even realize it, but it is just that we are so passionate about what we believe.

But, hopefully, HOPEFULLY, we can learn to become self-aware enough so as to recognize when we have gone beyond mere humble explanation of what we believe, to where we have wandered into the territory of self-righteously asserting ourselves.

In short, we need to learn not to give offense.

Second, we need to take no offense.

To be sure, we need to realize that offense is often not meant to be personal.

Somebody walks by us and doesn't acknowledge us, it feels personal.

But that other person may just have a lot on their minds.

Or, if somebody says something that offends us, HOPEFULLY we weigh our emotions, so as to discern what is perhaps going on in the other person.

Don't get me wrong, sometimes we do NEED to respond to the careless actions and words of others.

But, I do think it is true, that more often than not, offense is taken by us, when in truth no offense was meant to be given by the other.

And finally, we need to refrain from passing along offense.

We need to refrain from engaging in gossip.

We need to refrain from rumormongering.

We need to refrain from indulging in suspicions.

I once heard a speaker IRONICALLY describe this way.

"Life is short...so make sure you spend as much time as possible on the internet arguing with strangers about politics."

Or to say it another way, “Life is short, so make sure you spend as much time entertaining other people’s second hand knowledge about this person or that person.”

“Life is short, so make sure you spend as much time spreading what you hear from your neighbor about that other person.”

“Life is short, so pass along as much gossip and rumors as you can before you take the big sleep.”

Really?

Good old Martin Luther went the other way in his explanation of the of the 8th commandment, “Thou shall not bear false witness.”

Luther said, “We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend our neighbor, speak well of our neighbor, and explain our neighbor’s actions in the best possible light.”

We should try to see and so then explain our neighbor’s actions and words in the best possible light.

Again, talk about radical justice.

PAUSE

So, I leave you with this advice today, advice I have found to be helpful, with respect to living into Jesus’ radical justice whereby we are to love our enemies, do good toward them, and bless and pray for them.”

I leave you with this advice.

Give no offense. Take no offense. And pass along no offense.

S Thanks be to God. Amen.