

## SERMON

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Stop! Sharp Turn Ahead

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**Leviticus 19:12, 9-18 & Matthew 5:38-48**

A few weeks ago, I attended a presbytery meeting in Guelph. It finished late, so I decided to stay over at a friend's in Guelph rather than head back to Stratford. In the morning, I made my way into Ayr, but the 401 West was blocked, and the traffic was not moving. So, I decided to turn off the highway and take a detour towards Cambridge. I didn't have my GPS, but I figured that I could cut through to Ayr on the backroads. Simple enough – I mean I knew the generally direction. I could do that even without my GPS. But after a few turns left and right, driving through a subdivision for a second time, and stuck in a one-way street in downtown Cambridge. I was lost! It was about 30 minutes later that I saw a sign that said "Welcome to Paris." Well at least I knew where I was now! It was probably my longest trip ever to work – but don't worry, I didn't charge mileage!

You see, I hadn't taken the time to read the map, to get directions, to properly read and follow the road signs. I thought I already knew what I was doing. And I think that maybe when we first read this scripture in Matthew, our response might be the same. It's a little sad, but sometimes we've heard Jesus' commands so often that they hardly register:

"Turn the other cheek." *Yeah – yeah -- sure.*

"Love you enemies." *Sounds nice -- why not?*

And out of our trained indifference, we rarely think deeply about actually trying to follow the directions.

Or, alternatively, we might hear Jesus' words for us and think that they're directions that are somewhat out of reach:

*“Turn the other cheek.” Are you kidding?! And get treated like a doormat?*

*“Love you enemies.” You can’t be serious!*

These commands -- and a host of Jesus’ other directions for us, seem to be sheer folly, idealistic sentiments that would be crazy to apply in the “real” world. Indeed, turning the other cheek and returning hatred with love is no way to get ahead in this world that is caught in the cycle of revenge and retribution. The rules of *this* kingdom are well known -- it’s a dog-eat-dog world, with emphasis on the survival of the fittest.

But Jesus calls the powers of the day into question by describing an entirely different way to relate to each other, inviting us into relationships governed not by power but by vulnerability grounded in love. He invites us to overcome the urge for retribution with loving submission and forbearance. He tells us to

*“love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.” (Matthew 5:44)*

These are words that Gandhi would similarly say almost two thousand years later, telling us that *“An eye for an eye’ makes all people blind,”* Jesus recognized that strength eventually fails. Power corrupts. And survival of the fittest leaves so many bodies on the ground. Love alone transforms, redeems, and creates new life. As Martin Luther King, Jr., a student of both Jesus and Gandhi, once said, *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”*

So it may not seem like a new message. We’ve heard it before. And when Jesus was preaching, he was well aware that the gathered crowds would know the laws and commands of the Hebrew teachings. They would know the laws that we read in Leviticus 19. But in Jesus’ teaching he takes those laws and moves them beyond a simple code of conduct. He doesn’t just give us a list of ‘dos’ and

'don'ts'. He doesn't outline a holiness code. Instead, he gives us directions that require us to stop and think. Jesus promotes attitude and motive, above visible and quantifiable observance of the laws; he puts the positive will of God before the negative avoidance of specific sins; and he preaches about far reaching principles rather than specific rules. In other words, it is not enough to just live a life that follows the laws of Moses – anyone can follow a list of rules. But, Jesus is telling us that to be a disciple requires us to be *“more than others”* (Matthew 5:47) It requires us to have a change of thought. A whole new way of living. Now don't get me wrong – Jesus is not saying that the laws and commandments are not important. Jesus tells us in the same chapter:

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”* (Matthew 5:17).

No – Jesus is simply asking us to look behind the laws to the mind and character of God in all divines. Jesus tells his disciples that they are to draw their inspiration not from a rule book, not from the norms of society, but from the character of God. We are to strive to be holy like God is holy, to be perfect like God is perfect. Matthew 5:48 tells us:

*“be perfect, like our heavenly God is perfect.”* (Matthew 5:48)

“Be perfect,” — Jesus would have used the Greek word, *telos*, which can indeed be translated “perfect,” but rather than just morally perfect, it typically means something that has grown up, matured, and now reached its perfect end. That is, *telos*. It is the goal or desired outcome of a thing. A fruit tree's *telos*, we might say, is to grow mature and tall so that it can bear fruit. So maybe Jesus is not simply *commanding* something *of* us but also *commending* something *in* us?

Jesus is outlining his vision of God's kingdom and he is giving clear directions to those who desire to be a part of it. Which is why we need to take them seriously. He's not inviting you to figure out how to make the most of this world or have your best life now. And he's not even inviting you to find a safe port amid the storms of this world. Rather, he's starting a revolution by calling the rules of this world into question.

So if we are inclined to read over these familiar words too quickly in our haste to get on with the familiar story of Lent. Or if we want to dismiss these commands out of hand as pious idealisms, I'd urge us instead to slow down and take them more seriously. Stop, and think which way you will turn. I hear in these commands the invitation to be those people God has created us to be, so that we might not just persevere through this challenging life, but actually flourish, making a difference to those around us by sharing the abundant life Jesus has given us.

Crazy? Maybe. But Jesus is not only dead serious about what he promises but he actually will die -- and rise again! -- to show us that it's true. As disciples of Christ, we have a responsibility to continue the work that Jesus started. We have the God given potential as people of faith, and as the community of the Church, to change the world we live in. We can absolutely make a difference in the world if we simply believe in ourselves, and if we live by Jesus radical ethics, and if we model a new and different way of being in the world. So, as we journey on together as the people of Knox at our AGM, and as the United Church with changes in structure, let us take time to Stop, and make sure we are going in the right direction. The direction of the kingdom of God.