

"A Different Set of Rules" – Matthew 5:38-48 – February 19, 2017

In October of 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV had revenge on his mind. On an early fall day in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a peaceful rural community had no idea of the horror that was about to descend upon them. Having written four suicide notes, one to his wife and one to each of his three children, Roberts left his home with no intention of returning. He arrived at a one-room schoolhouse and took the small school hostage. Roberts dismissed the boys, a pregnant woman, and three parents with infants. He kept only the girls, 10 of them between the ages of 6 and 13 years old. Those who had been released quickly called for help, and the police arrived soon after.

In a final cell phone call to his wife, Roberts claimed that he was "acting out in revenge for something that happened 20 years ago." He also stated that he was angry at God. Police unsuccessfully attempted to talk with Roberts. 40 minutes into the ordeal, the gunman began shooting. It took police about two minutes to break into the school. By then Roberts had shot himself after shooting all the girls. 5 died, the 5 others were critically injured.

How does a community respond to such a horrific act of violence, especially violence toward its most vulnerable members? Shock of course. And grief. Then probably outrage. And perhaps finally a demand for retribution. I have heard it said by some, when events like these take place, that when the perpetrator commits suicide, there is the sense that he or she is taking the easy way out. Instead of facing the consequences of their actions.

We are fortunate to have a strong system of justice in our nation. Those who commit crimes, should pay for it. It's pretty simple. We appreciate it because it appeals to our need for a swift and concise sense of justice. And it's a system that's been around for a long time.

We read in the Old Testament in the Book of Leviticus from chapter 24, the following: "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered." This law of reciprocity, or principal of retaliation, became the basis for Jewish law. This was put into place to make sure that the punishment fit the crime and to restrain retaliation from escalating, or going beyond the level of the original offense.

Yet when we come to the passage in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus addresses this eye for eye, tooth for tooth business, we wonder what he is up to. He seems to be contradicting this standard and accepted practice of retaliation.

Jesus first talks about turning the other cheek. To Jesus' audience, a slap on the cheek was more than just an act of physical violence; it was considered to be an insult. No one likes to be insulted, and the immediate response is to fight back. But Jesus says no. Don't retaliate.

Jesus gives two more examples. If someone takes you into court, suing you for the shirt off your back, go ahead and give them your coat also. This would be especially difficult since in that time, because most people only wore two garments – an inner garment covered by a cloak. Giving both would leave the person naked. Obviously this is extreme, but Jesus is using the example to show how far we might be pushed, yet still he warns against retaliation.

The third example of going the second mile relates to the Roman army. A Roman soldier could force a civilian to carry his military gear for up to one mile. It didn't matter what the person was doing at the time. If the soldier wanted you now, you had to drop everything and go with him. Civilians forced into this obligation were never happy about it, and longed for some type of revenge against the soldier. They held a seething hatred toward the Romans. No one likes to be forced into action, especially by an enemy. Instead of getting angry for being interrupted and required to do something you didn't want to do, Jesus said to go ahead and go another mile. One mile is required, so go beyond what is required.

And finally in verse 42, Jesus says to be generous to those who beg or who want to borrow from you. In other words, show compassion to all those who come to you in need. Do not avoid helping others.

In this passage, Jesus is talking about our interpersonal relationships – how we relate to one another. The response that Jesus wants us to have is love. To those who insult you, respond in love. To those who seek to wrong you, respond in love. To those who come to you with need, respond in love. The focus is not so much on what has been done to us but on how we respond to the other person.

This is the opposite of what was originally expected – the law of reciprocity – eye for eye, tooth for tooth. If we look at life through the lens of that law, the focus tends to be on ourselves. What was done to me? How have I been wronged? And what can I do to even the score?

But looking at these situations through the eyes of love, there is no score to settle. The focus is no longer on me but on the other person. And if this weren't already some pretty hard teaching, Jesus pushes us even further. He teaches us, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." It is one thing to love our friends and family and those close to us. But it goes against our nature to love our enemies. Furthermore, to pray for our loved ones, that's pretty easy. But how hard is it to pray for those who cause us grief and hardship?

Jesus is teaching us to love as God loves. Jesus is describing what life is like in the kingdom of God. This is by no means easy. The word around us thinks in terms of power and control and might. The strongest wins. We like to think that God relates to the world as humans do, desiring

to punish the evildoers and hating those who pursue what is wrong. But God's power is in love. We forget that God's mercy and grace extend to all people, good and bad. Jesus reminds us that the sun rises on both the righteous and the unrighteous, and the rain comes to both as well. God relates to all through love. God's power and might is witnessed in God's love and mercy.

I read a story about a holy man who was practicing his morning meditation under a tree whose roots stretched out over the riverbank. During his meditation, he noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion caught in the roots was about to drown. The holy man crawled out on the roots and reached down to free the scorpion, but every time he did so, the scorpion struck back at him, trying to sting him. A man passing by stopped and said to the holy man, "Don't you know that's a scorpion, and it's in the nature of a scorpion to want to sting?" The holy man replied, "That may well be, but it is my nature to save, and I will not let the scorpion's desire to hurt change my desire to help." (*The Strength to Love*, by Lee Koontz) It is in the nature of God to love. What is in our nature as those who are identified as Christians?

Jesus calls us to live in this world by a different set of rules. As residents in God's kingdom, our relationships with other people are based in love not retaliation. Jesus never said that the commandments should not be obeyed. But what he did do is show us the nature of the God behind those commandments. They are not simply rules to live by, but by following the example that Jesus set before us, they are a way of living and relating to others that has its basis in God's love.

I started this message with a story about a horrible tragedy that took place in a small school in Pennsylvania. One of the most striking features of the story was not the tragedy itself, but the response to it.

This took place in an Amish community in Pennsylvania. On the day of the shooting, some elders in the community taught the younger people to put aside any hate for the man and to not think of him as evil. They were to think of him as a person who had a wife and mother and who would stand before a just God. Not only did the community reach out in support of those families directly affected by the event, within hours they had reached out to the family of the shooter and offered forgiveness. They comforted his wife, parents and in-laws. They attended his funeral. They set up a charitable fund for his family. (info on the school shooting from wikipedia and various news sources)

When some expressed confusion over such swift and extensive forgiveness and love, scholars on Amish life noted that forgoing grudges is a deeply rooted part of Amish culture. The lack of a desire for vengeance does not undo the tragedy or right any wrongs. Instead it points forward, to a future that is full of hope and to a love that overcomes all.