

From Matthew: Jesus said, 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. Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.

Every time I hear, “an eye for an eye,” it reminds me of the first man I ever buried. He was a wonderful man, named Ron. After he died, his wife told me this story. Ron and Sharon had only been married a few years and were expecting their first daughter. As they drove along, Ron spotted one of God’s fairer creatures on the sidewalk. This momentarily consumed his attention.

Sharon was concerned because, as she said, she was afraid he might wreck the car while enjoying this masterpiece! Like any good wife, concerned for the safety of their unborn child and her husband’s driving record, she punched him in the arm hard and told him to keep his eyes on the road. Without flinching, Ron told her, “I promised to love, honor, and cherish you, but I never promised you that I would go blind!”

With that in mind, we continue today in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew’s collection of Jesus’ ethics and

teachings. Matthew didn’t call it the Sermon on the Mount, just those who came after him, but I think it is a pretty good name because, sometimes as we move from difficult precept to difficult precept, it kind of feels like we are climbing a mountain. Step by step it gets a little bit harder. And step by step the vista of the world, if you and I were to be persuaded by it, becomes that much more stunning. Like climbing a mountain.

The base camp is the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It’s beautiful there, but no one is meant to stay. Then comes rocky terrain. Don’t divorce. Love instead. Don’t lust in your heart. Cut off your hand if it causes sin. Rough terrain.

Today we reach what we might think of as the apex of this mountain, and truth be told, most people don’t ever really make it this high. Maybe Jesus’ teachings here ought to come with a warning that inexperienced climbers ought not to proceed. *Do not resist an evildoer. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemy as yourself. Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.*

I suspect most of us won't make it there, not many times in life. But you know what the top of the mountain is like. The world is like nothing you have ever seen. Down below, all the things of life seem large and overwhelming, but not up there. They seem so small and insignificant. You are overwhelmed by the beauty of it all. From the top of the mountain, if you make it, you find yourself persuaded that those things like love and forgiveness and perfection may in fact be worth the journey it took us to find them there.

Our collect this morning, the short prayer with which we began our service offers a perspective on how we are to love, and to me it sounds like a message of guidance sent from the mountain's peak.

"O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you." Perfect love. Your greatest gift, which is love. The true

bond of peace and virtue, without which life is like death. Perfect love. That is the view from above.

Back on the ground, it is different. I remember an awful day years ago when I was out walking and ahead of me was a homeless man asking for money. There was another man walking toward me, dressed well, and he reached into his pocket. He threw some change down onto the sidewalk and told the man to pick it up. And then he made it even worse. He smiled at me and laughed as he walked by, as if I were to share in what he had done. I have never forgotten. It is possible to do good without love, and end up toothless and blind and dead before God. This is not where we are meant to stay.

Our OT reading today comes from Leviticus, the Law of God that was given to Moses and to the Hebrew people so many years ago. We call it Leviticus because it involves the priests of Israel, called Levites, and their Law, but Jews don't call it by that name. That name came when it was translated into Greek:

*Leuitikón*. But in Hebrew, they call the book “And he called,” or “God Called,” because the book begins with those words, “and the Lord called to Moses from the Tent of Meeting.” The Greek name is based on the rules of the Law, but the Hebrew name is based on the premise that all of this is rooted in God’s calling. And that small difference suggests something different.

And it is like a roadmap, a mountain climber’s guide. An old one, to be sure. But as we read this portion of the Law given to Moses today, don’t hear it only as Law or as rules, hear it as a guide to find the One calling from the top of the mountain, bidding us on.

At its heart, so much of God’s calling is about how we deal with each other. And it goes so far as to suggest that we leave a few grapes out there on the vine and a little wheat left to be harvested, for others climbing this same path to have. And I surmise this based on my experience years ago: if you leave the grapes, you can’t throw them on the ground and laugh. This is a kind of love. Let them gather their own food and

provide for their own families the same way that you would want to do. This is what it means to love your neighbor. Not just to give, but giving in a way that understands what it is like to have to gather someone else’s grapes. Give others a chance to climb the mountain the same way you are doing.

Leviticus tells us that we see God’s calling in how we harvest fields and how we pick grapes and how we handle business affairs and how we treat our neighbor. And it seems to me like a highlighted sentence in this mountain climbing guide: the opportunity to show love is all around us, everywhere we look, step by difficult step up the mountain, every day of our lives.

The other thing you notice is how similar this portion of Leviticus mountain climber’s guide (titled “God’s Calling” in the first edition) is like a lot of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. But Jesus has his own climber’s guide. He talks about what it means to climb perfectly, to love perfectly. I think he must have seen that, despite the intent to follow the love and

care of God's calling, sometimes those who scaled this holy mountain still missed God's calling. Sometimes they despised those who gather the grapes. They failed to realize what it means to be a neighbor. They climbed the mountain but tripped on rocky terrain.

So as Jesus returns our attention to this ancient calling to be a people whose lives are rooted in love, he issues a new version of the holy mountain guide. *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Turn the other cheek. Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.* Something like that is to realize God's true calling and make it to the perfection of love.

And that is what I think Jesus was hoping to teach. You could follow the mountain climber's guide and still miss out on what it means to climb a holy mountain. You might even miss out on the view from the top.

It doesn't really matter if you get there blind and without any teeth left! But if we could make it to the top with what each of us can give instead of what is ours to

keep, well, we could very likely end up with a very different kind of journey, where everyone keeps their teeth and keeps from going blind... and sees the mountain vista for what it is.

You see, that is where I think Ron's comments so many years ago were true. I know it isn't what he meant, but it is true; God's call to us is not to go blind. No, instead it is to see everything that is out there—the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, the systems in life that are based on revenge and not love—and to discern God's call to us in every situation of life, every step by difficult step up the mountain. Sometimes it is love for the stranger and the enemy and the persecutor—to see them for who they are and to understand why they hurt and to love them despite all odds. But so often, it is about freeing ourselves from the hate and hang-ups that keep us from loving the people who are the most important to us, because we miss out on loving them when we spend all of our time keeping score and getting to the top. That, Jesus says, is not the point.

The point, of course, is to love... to love perfectly. If we ever hope to fulfill that lofty calling, we must keep ourselves from going blind! We must see all the rocky terrain as well as its possibilities. We must move from the constraints of the Law to an appreciation of God's calling to us. And if we could, not only would we avoid tripping on the rocky terrain, we would also have more time to see—actually to see—the beauty of the way that leads to the top *and* that the opportunity to love is so often sitting there in the front seat, right next to us.

O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.