

**Be What, Now!?**  
**February 20, 2011**  
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**Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ**

The sun was bright. Occasional red and gold leaves stood out among aging green. The air was crisp, and fraught with new possibilities. He held a gift in his hands, for his new teacher. He was relaxed, happy, and ready for a new year in this new place.

He was walking down the hall to deliver the gift when he passed by another other young man who seemed a little surly, and mumbled some vague threats, but he ignored him. He figured he was just a big talker, picking on a new freshman, who was an easy target, after all.

After dropping off the gift, he headed back by the big talker. Now there were more threats. His tone sharpened. He grew louder...and louder. His face grew redder. Then he pushed the gift giver, who tried to calm the loud boy down. He just wanted to be on his way back home. But then it just came out of nowhere. In a blur the gift giver was hit hard. Really hard. His skull actually cracked. It would likely mean a coma if he was hit like that again.

But he didn't hit him back. He just looked at him in silence, with forgiveness in his heart. That boy must have been in real pain to lash out like that. For whatever reason, his attacker just fled.

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Parenthood can be hard. There are times when even the youngest children are just *so willful!* And when they get a little older some and their talking turns to talking back, it can be really hard to stay calm; even if they are kids. There is just no reasoning with a four year old sometimes. Add to that the pressure of having two kids running around the house, and some days just do not go well.

And, it was one of *those days*. The older child, a boy, had been at it again and again—using the word “no!” like a weapon. Running away from the time out spot, no matter how many times he was put there. Doing everything he could to test the limits of his father's patience. Moment built on moment; defiance added to defiance, and then Dad just snapped. He got really *loud* and *really scary* and he just began yelling at that little limits-testing boy.

But he didn't get too far. The other child; the two year old daughter ran in between them before the Dad could yell too much. She got in between them, and she sheltered her older brother by holding up a hand to her father's angry face. She also yelled “No!” But there was more. She said “you love your son, and you don't want to be angry at him or scare him!” The little girl was absolutely right. The father knew it. He stopped yelling; tearfully hugged his children and asked their forgiveness for his anger.

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A man and woman were married. Things went okay for awhile, but lately they fought a lot. Things had gotten really bad. They had already begun divorce proceedings, but neither one had found another place to live yet.

Most days they could just avoid each other. They could just slip in and out of the house to go off to work or otherwise get some space. She often went to friends' houses. Sometimes right after work. She might stay all night. He would slip off to friends, too, or to the meditation group he had recently joined. Sometimes it helped just to sit still and let his feelings leak out.

Some days were harder, because sometimes they seemed to just trip over each other. There was just nothing they could do to get space from each other. And that made both of them feel a little bit cornered...trapped.

So, occasionally one would fire off a cross word at the other, and that whole cycle of hurt would start—old memories would be dredged up. Old arguments would get recycled. New insults would be created and tossed at each other like knives. Eventually they would retreat to opposite ends of the house and cool down alone.

Then one rainy day both of their plans got cancelled and there was nowhere to go. There was nothing to do. There was no one else except the other. The old pains were churning, wounds were raw.

It was her turn to start it this time. So, she fired off an insult. He felt it like a gut punch. He felt anger rising in him like a thermometer on a summer day. But then he took a breath. Then another. Then more. He somehow claimed a moment of peace from his meditation practices. He just let the anger fall like it had risen. He didn't join the fray this time. Instead, he let the anger pass.

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Are you like me? When Jesus says "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," is your first reaction to ask "Be *what* now?!"<sup>1</sup> I mean—is he serious? *Can* we be perfect? We're human, right—aren't we basically imperfect? And Jesus gives us all those examples of crazy behavior right before he tells us to be perfect, too. "Do not resist an evil doer...turn the other cheek...give to everyone who begs of you...love your enemies," and more, too...can Jesus really be serious? Do *what*, now?! Be *what* now!?

The greatest gift of being a Christian is that we have Jesus as our human guide in life. He is an excellent ethical guide. He is compassionate, wise, and forgiving. But the hardest part of being Christian is that we have Jesus as our guide. Because Jesus, while fully human, is also somehow fully possessed of the Spirit of God. Doesn't that feel like a mixed message? I suppose that is why Christ's full nature—human *and* divine—is often referred to as a mystery: it doesn't really make sense, at least not logically. We may even feel that it is somehow beyond us. I think that is why we spend so much time *worshipping* Jesus and begging his forgiveness instead of trying to *act* more like him. It feels like a trap to be invited to act like Jesus or God, How can we possibly accomplish *that!*?

Yet whenever Jesus calls a disciple, he asks not for their worship, but for their companionship. He doesn't say "kneel down to me," he simply says *follow me*. In this morning's reading, he

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:48.

even says: “I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...*”<sup>2</sup> Here, and elsewhere throughout the gospels, Jesus invites us not merely into companionship; not merely into discipleship; but *also* into being his very own sister or brother in relationship to God. That bears repeating: Jesus wants you, and me—and every one of us—to be his sister or brother in relationship to our mutual parent God!

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>3</sup> We get hung up on the idea of perfection. So hung up that we miss the end of that provocative sentence: “as your heavenly Father is perfect.” So, this begs the question: *how* is God perfect? The knee jerk reaction—which I think accounts for all our inherent anxiety with this passage—is that God is perfect in *all ways*. I have no doubt that there are many Christians who would insist that this is true. Perhaps you are among them. For the record, I am not. Now, don’t get me wrong, I like the idea, but I also read the Bible. There is a certain rigidity in human concepts of perfection; a certain fixedness. And God is changing all the time throughout both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. God moves and breathes and changes and grows. Abraham, Moses and the Prophets all have their quarrels with God which result in different approaches than God originally plans. God grows in love throughout both Testaments—and *that* is how I understand God’s perfection to be most clearly demonstrated. God grows in affection. God grows in love. *That* is what makes God perfect. That is how our heavenly parent God is perfect, and how we are called to be as well.

Now, before anyone g starts belting out “Oh God who changest not, abide with me,” or somesuch I need you to hear something. It is my deepest faith that the Bible describes a *human* understanding of God, but not the fullness of God. It is no doubt *inspired* by God, but it is written by us humans, and it bears our fingerprints and limitations. Otherwise the Bible is bigger than God, and we can completely wrap our minds around God—which would mean that we, too, are bigger than God. And I call “foul” on that. God is forever beyond our human conceptions. However, as Jesus says, *acting* like God is not always beyond our grasp.

We can respond to all the craziness that life offers with a love which will catch others off guard. We need to be creative and flexible about it. I believe that when we respond to violence and anger by disengaging from it that we reveal the limits of violence and its ultimate source, which is fear rather than love. Now, of course there are those people who will need to defend themselves. We are called to care for the outcast, the widow and the orphan—all those who have been slighted by culture. There are many such people who have been forced to the fringes of human societies and are disempowered. And it *is* our job to care for and defend them as well. Yet even then creatively and without violence, like Jesus did with the woman that people wanted to stone. Without violence, Jesus was able to short circuit the urge for violence among a whole crowd. We are always called to stop taking an eye for an eye in order to reveal the hollowness and corruption of the cycle of violence. We are called to stop feeding that cycle, so that we bear witness to the emerging reign of love which comes from God.

When someone breaks our bodies, we can decide to forgive them instead of taking an eye or tooth, or cheek in exchange. They may just flee in that moment because we will reveal that love

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:44b-45a.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:48.

is stronger than unconsidered hate. When we see someone acting in anger—even when they are the ones in power—we can speak love to it. That may just reveal to them what is really important. When we feel anger in our hearts, we can just take a breath; or two, or more, and remember that anger is dwarfed by the love of God. Christ offers other examples, too, of course—love and pray for your enemies; give to *all* who ask of you; be perfect as your God is perfect...the point is not to doubt our capabilities. After all, we are *all* made in the image of our good and loving God; and we are all invited into God's family through our faith. We are called to strive to be *more like God*. And that isn't a set up. We can achieve it! Jesus did it and we can, too. We, too, can strive to increase our love, even in the face of adversity. To bring blessings to all, not just those whom we love right away; and to pray so that we may come to see everyone as beloved children of God.

And that's the good news of the gospel this morning: Christ believes in *us*. God knows we *can* become more God-like. And the Holy Spirit, and the company of one another, *will* lead us into that deeper discipleship and familyhood with God if only we open ourselves to that grace.

Amen?

**Matthew 5:38-48**

38“‘You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43“‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.