

Blessed Are the Grown Ups *Matthew 5:38-47; Matthew 26:47-56*

Charles A. Summers
First Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia

“Be ye perfect as your father in heaven in perfect.” In one Bible group I was in this week, after this was read out loud, there was embarrassed laughter around the circle. Jesus can’t really be serious about us becoming perfect, can he?

Another way to translate this word is “mature”—be mature like your Abba in heaven. Be a grown up like God is a grown up. That, I think, gets closer to what Jesus is asking of us. We are to grow in faith, hope, and love and to get more mature at dealing with conflict, at loving our neighbors, at finding ways not to hate our enemies, but even to pray for them. Be a grown up.

Children are quick tempered and prone to getting even. Nobody likes coming out on the short end of the stick. So parents with more than one child at the table have to devise constant strategies to defuse the constant “that’s not fair . . . , he got the biggest piece; she got to go first; he got to sit by the window last time.” Children are always keeping score and sure that they are losing out. And they want to get even. There is a story told about my brother fairly often at family reunions. When he was in the second grade, he and another little boy were marched to the principal’s office. The teacher stood the two little boys in front of the principal’s desk. The other little boy had very clear bite marks on his arm. The principal looked at my brother and asked, “Did you bite Henry?” He nodded yes. “Why did you bite him?” “I was trying to stop a fight.” “Who was fighting?” My brother answered, “We were.”

“Grow up,” says Jesus, “like your Abba in heaven.” You and I know that biting someone else on the arm is no way to settle a dispute. We have grown out of that. Well, this whole Sermon on the Mount is about continuing to grow toward the image of God in Christ. And some of it is very difficult.

“You have heard it said, but I say”—that is the form that these lessons take. Jesus wants his disciples, his followers, his students to see that there is a still more excellent way. They do not have to continue to repeat the same old rules. They do not have to continue the status quo of retaliation, of an eye for eye, a lawsuit for a lawsuit. Not in this family. We do not live like that. “We know a better way,” says Jesus.

This is a true story. A thirteen-year-old boy was having trouble with his homework. He was sitting at the kitchen table. His mother was across the room at the sink. In his frustration, he cursed under his breath. It was some new word he had picked up from the cool older kids. His mother heard him. She calmly went over and sat down at the table. She looked him in the eye and said, “Bobby, I know that the homework is hard and you are frustrated. But using foul language does not help. And we do not talk like that in our family,” and his 40-year-old, apron-wearing, dishwashing mother proceeded to list 15 four-letter words. She covered all the headlines of foul language. Her son sat there stunned, his mouth hanging open. She paused, “We know these words. But we do not use such words in this family.”

Jesus sits on the mount and says to his followers, “You have heard it said, but we do not do such things in this family. We are going to grow up like our Abba who art

in heaven.” So do not return evil for evil. If someone insults you with a slap on the cheek, stand up to them, but do not strike back. Better to turn the other cheek than to become like them. If someone is after your stuff, thinking lawsuits are going to settle everything, give them some stuff and more. It’s only stuff. God will take care of you. If a foreign soldier makes you carry his pack for a kilometer, carry it two. Show him that you are stronger than he thinks. God will take care of you. Love your neighbors; love even your enemies, because God in heaven loves all people, made all people in God’s image, and wants what is good for everyone. God will take care of you.

Do not return evil for evil, but overcome evil with good. Wow, this is hard. And we do not get there all at once, any more than we can grow up over night. We are working on this all our days. “Take up your cross and follow me,” says Jesus. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake; they are close to the kingdom of heaven right now. They are already in the company of the prophets and people of God who have gone before them.

Let us be clear. This is not the same thing as cowardice or acquiescence to what is evil. This does not mean standing by while someone else is hurt. Jesus loudly denounced scribes and Pharisees who cheated the poor in the name of religion. He stood next to a woman who was about to be stoned and held off the mob. He stood up to the gang that was sent to arrest him and chided them for coming to get him under the cover of darkness, when they could have arrested him in broad daylight at the temple. Evil likes to hide in the shadows. Jesus continued to call Judas and the disciples his friends, knowing full well that they would betray and desert him.

Rome killed Jesus. It probably killed most of the first Christian leaders, including Peter and Paul and James the brother of Jesus. The Christians continued to pray for the empire, to bear witness to the love and forgiveness offered in Christ Jesus. There are repeated stories of the Christians during their early persecutions going to their deaths singing hymns and praying for God to forgive their persecutors. Over time the Christian faith grew, and Rome faded away.

After the Nazis captured Denmark during World War II, they ordered all the Jews to wear a yellow star pinned to their clothes. It was a first step toward their persecution and removal. The Danish King, Christian the Tenth, put a yellow star on his clothes, and so did many other non-Jewish citizens. If a foreign soldier compels you to go one kilometer, go two. The Nazis were stymied by this turning the other cheek, this identifying with the oppressed and not the oppressor. Fewer than one in ten Jews in Denmark lost their lives during that war.

Recently some of us traveled to Israel. On the day we went from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, we had to pass through the new security wall. It is a thirty-foot-tall, concrete barrier with barbed wire at the top. It walls off the five Palestinian cities in the center of the west bank. The Israelis have imprisoned the Palestinians. The Palestinians inside the wall may not enter or leave without Israeli permission.

We went to the Bethlehem Bible College. We talked with two brothers who are Palestinian Christians. Their father was killed by the Israelis during the war in 1948. Their home in Jerusalem was taken from them. They grew up as refugees in their own land. They are now Bible professors teaching about the love of Christ inside the security wall zone. Their oldest brother, an attorney, founded the West Bank Center for Nonviolence. He teaches Martin Luther King methods of nonviolent conflict resolution to Arabs, Jews, anybody who will listen.

While we were riding around the town, we came to an open field. Our guide, a Palestinian Christian and a student at the Bible college said, "This is the field that remembers the story of Boaz and Ruth. We say that this is where they met. It is a story that continues to give us hope. For Ruth was an Arab, and Boaz was a Jew."

Grow up, like your Abba in heaven is a grown up. The world knows too much of violence and retaliation. Study a still more excellent way, even when it includes suffering. For the cross leads to salvation and hope, and the sword does not. Love your enemies and pray for them, for then you will be in the family; you will be acting like children of your father in heaven. That is how we do things in this family.

In a meeting to plan for the two-hundredth anniversary of this congregation, something came up about wars that have been endured. One person said, "You know, during the Civil War here in Richmond, Dr. Thomas V. Moore spent seven days a week for those years caring for his battered flock. Sons were being sent home in coffins. Badly wounded soldiers were returning to the city for care. Every family was affected. Food was short. Winters were cold. But this pastor also made time to visit prisoners of war at the Libby Prison and on Belle Isle. He went to minister to soldiers who were called Yankees, who had shot at and killed some of his flock. But they were also sons of other people's families, some of them Presbyterians from Pennsylvania or New York. He went to care for their children, too."

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Abba who art in heaven. That is how we do things in this family.

I will close with this story, from an NPR "This I Believe" show. The speaker is a veteran who served 18 months in Iraq. She was sent home with post traumatic stress disorder. She suffered from nightmares, hallucinations, and sleep deprivation. After a time, she went to Guantanamo Bay to serve as an interrogator. She writes:

When I returned to work, I began to meet again with my clients, which is what I chose to call my detainees. We were all exhausted. Many of them came back from a war having lost friends, too. I wondered how many of them still heard screaming at night like I did. My job was to obtain information that would help keep U.S. soldiers safe. We'd meet, play dominoes, I'd bring chocolate, and we'd talk a lot. There was one detainee, Mustafa, who joked that I was his favorite interrogator in the world, and I joked back that he was my favorite terrorist. He'd committed murders and done things we all wished he could take back. He asked me one day, suddenly serious, "You know everything about me, but still you do not hate me. Why?"

His question stopped me cold. I said "Everyone has done things in their past that they're not proud of. I know I have, but I also know God still expects me to love Him with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. That means you." Mustafa started to cry. "That's what my God says, too," he said.

Accepting Mustafa helped me accept myself again. My clients may never know this, but my year with them helped me to finally heal. My nightmares stopped.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will learn what it means to be children of God.