

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9 – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Deuteronomy 10: 17-21, Psalm 145:1-9, Hebrews 11:8-16, Matthew 5: 43-48

I grew up in the suburbs of Seattle in the mid-1960's. It was politically and culturally a turbulent time. My father was a veteran of World War II, having served in Europe. He was drafted and entered the military as a private, rising to the rank of sergeant by the end of the fighting.

My brother and I were teenagers, filled with idealism as only the young and inexperienced can be. We knew how the world needed to change. I remember long conversations with my father, who patiently countered our arguments, without anger or ridicule. The phrase I remember most is "yes but."

It was a phrase that was on the lips of both by brother and myself as we talked with my father. We could actually see his point but could not quite give up the notion that if things were only to change as we envisioned, all would be right with the world. It was simple. What we did not realize was that it was simplistic.

Yes, but... The phrase that unites two sides of any argument. Yes, but... the phrase that separates what is seen as realistic from what might be termed idealistic. Yes, but..., what separates that which is human from that which is deemed spiritual. "Love. Your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." yes, but....

Today is the Fourth of July, that day each year when we pause to remember the history of this nation. The day, each year when we remember the blessings that God has given us in this country. Yes, but... not all of our brothers and sisters have experienced the blessings in equal measure. In the most recent year or so we have become aware once again of inequity in our system. We have become aware of dis-ease around us. Our way of government and the very core of our political structure, voting, has been called into question. We are aware as perhaps only a few times in our lifetime that it is uncomfortable and even dangerous to talk with one another, especially to talk with those who we believe may disagree with us. The split in our nation is deep and visible.

It is a coincidence or perhaps a God-incidence that this year the Fourth of July comes on Sunday the day when we gather together to worship regardless of our political and social views. The gospel read today is especially appointed for Independence Day. It is a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, preached by Jesus to the crowds of people who came to hear of a better way of living, a way of living ordained by God.

The few verses before our reading this Sunday speak of a reversal of the human impulse to retaliate when harmed. Those verses are hard to hear and harder still to imagine as a way of living in our current world climate. "Do not resist an evil doer" we are told. Turn the other cheek, if any wants to take your cloak give them your coat as well, if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. All of these admonitions are familiar to us. Some, going the extra mile and turning of other cheek have found their way into the secular culture as well. And if these were not enough, if I were not already squirming with discomfort, the final sentence calls us to be perfect as God is perfect.

It would be easy to write off this portion of the gospel as being fine for Jesus and fine for that period of time, but impractical for our time. It has been tried for centuries by Christians who sought to develop strategies for avoiding these words in their lives. It has been said that these were "spiritual" commands directed at our souls and not intended to be lived out in real time.

My experience of the Jesus of scripture and of prayer is of someone for whom spiritual and real were one and the same. What Jesus calls us to be and do, he calls us to be and do with our whole being, body, mind, heart, and soul. There is no “yes but,” in these commands.

Perfect as God is perfect? Isn't that a bit unrealistic, even blasphemous to think we could be perfect especially as perfect as God? Perfect, at least as the gospel uses the term has several meanings. In this case, it is not to be without error or blemish. Perfect as God is perfect calls us to be whole as God is whole. It calls us to love as God loves. God's perfection is God's love for the world and all that is in the world. That love is experienced by human beings as the love we have for one another, expressed in real and tangible ways. Turning the other cheek, giving when asked, going the extra mile. All of those actions are actions of love, demonstrating God's love through the person who acts and the person who receives.

This call to be perfect as God is perfect is the call to each one of us and the call to our nation. It is not doomed to failure. Admittedly we have a long way to go, each of us and our nation. Admittedly, this will not be easy or comfortable. There will be many times when we are tempted to respond, ‘yes but...’. When we live our lives as agents of God's love in the world and with one another, we are reaching toward that perfection of God we are called to be. As we live this way, it will be at times difficult, we may be tempted to give up. Many whom we encounter will respond badly, in anger or ridicule. Some may take advantage of us or at least try to do so. We are not called to let them do so. We are not required to be doormats. As a friend once wisely said, God calls us to be loving and giving, not stupid.

In the words of another Christian, more eloquent than mine: “‘Be perfect’ is not an indictment; it is a promise that carries the possibility that we may love the world as God has loved us—fully, richly, abundantly and completely.”