

Get Your Crash Helmets Here

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, February 20, 2011: The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on Matthew 5:38-48.*

One of my main responsibilities—and joys—here at St. Bart's is overseeing our Welcome and Membership ministries. St. Bart's Central is open every day of the year, offering information and hospitality to the incredible number and variety who enter our doors. St. Bart's also has a fabulous Welcome Committee and a sizable corps of dedicated Ushers and Greeters. Together these folks are the front lines of St. Bart's famous "radical welcome." These groups also happen to be some of the most friendly, down-to-earth, delightful people you'll ever meet. That and their clear passion for welcoming others to this community make them really good at what they do.

Even with all that, our welcome wouldn't work if it weren't shared by all of us, including all the people who work behind the scenes to make our welcome happen, and including each one of you. Every time you greet someone you don't know, when you help connect a new person with a class or a group or a volunteer program, when you notice a newcomer and offer them a seat or a bulletin or a hymnal or a listening ear, you are extending that radical welcome, which is really God's radical welcome, not just our own.

All this is to say: Welcome is a very big deal at St. Bart's. We take it seriously, but not ponderously. We work at it, but with light hearts.

We're gearing up right now for the next Welcome Sunday, next Sunday during the 11a.m. service. We have a huge EXPLORE class, wonderfully diverse in backgrounds and ages, many of whom will be joining St. Bart's officially next Sunday.

Everything is going so well . . . and then we get readings like this one from the Gospel of Matthew today: Turn the other cheek, give the shirt off your back, go the extra mile. Love your enemies. Love your enemies?? These readings do *not* help the Welcome and Membership business!

At our Wednesday mid-day Bible Study this past week, there were audible groans when we read these verses from Matthew. Almost as loud as the groans from last Sunday's gospel, verses in Matthew just before those we read today, about murder and anger and judgment and hellfire, about divorce and adultery and lust in the heart. Ugh, I heard from some, this kind of stuff is why they left the church.

Good for these thoughtful bible study-ers. They are paying attention. These are hard lessons, some of the hardest. Especially these today: Turn the other cheek, give the shirt off your back, go the extra mile. Love your enemies. Perhaps whatever this meant to Matthew's community in the first century has lost in translation for us in 2011 at St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue?

It may help to know that "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" represented the most forward-thinking law of revenge at that time. It limited the retribution to the person who did you wrong (rather than wiping out his whole clan or village), and it was an attempt to make the punishment fit the crime: if I blinded you, you can inflict the same injury on me, but not kill me or my family. Primitive as this sounds to us, "an eye for an eye" actually represented a civilized step up from the complete mayhem rule of retribution of previous millennia.

That's nice to know, but did Jesus really say this? Scholars far more qualified than I say yes. Of all the things Jesus is reported to have said, scholars believe these particular teachings on turning the other cheek, giving your shirt and going the extra mile, and "love your enemies" are authentic teachings of Jesus.

They are teachings, parodies really, that would have sounded just as outrageous to Matthew's community as they do to us. Jesus continues to urge Matthew's community—and us—to go beyond obeying the letter of the law to honoring the deeper spirit of the law.

Being struck on the right cheek was a particularly grievous insult. It meant you'd either been hit by someone else's left (unclean) hand or by the back of someone's right hand, especially insulting. Turning your left cheek would offer your attacker a more honorable way to go.

If someone sues you for your coat (your outer garment), give them your inner garments as well. In a time when people only wore two garments, this means . . . you'd be left naked. Those listening in Jesus' time would have gotten the absurd humor in this. For us, it is another caution against Biblical literalism.

If a Roman soldier, your oppressor, orders you to carry something for one mile (as was legal for them to—remember Simon of Cyrene's being conscripted to carry Jesus' cross), then offer to carry it twice as far.

These three examples illustrate physical abuse, humiliation, having something taken that belongs to you, and being forced to do something against your will.

Enemies, by definition, are those who are out to do us harm, usually because of active hatred at some level, but always involving disregard for the dignity and worth of the other. Enemies are with us just as much today as they were in Jesus' time and in Matthew's time, and in every time before or since.

Physical abuse, humiliation, having what belongs to you taken, use of force—those ways of harming another person are all still with us. They are still here in their primitive forms. Ask anyone who has been beaten or raped by a stranger, or worse, by one of their own family.

These ways of harming are still with us in newer, more contemporary forms, too. Ask anyone who has been smeared or humiliated through Facebook or Twitter posts. Ask the teenagers who committed suicide

after their personal lives were splashed across the internet for all to see. Ask those who have lost their homes to predatory lenders.

Enemies are still with us in more dreary petty everyday ways: think office politics, snarky e-mails, malicious gossip, taking words out of context to deliberately twist their meaning.

Enemies are still with us. Love your enemies. How to love those who wish you harm or actually do you harm? That is as difficult for us today as it was for those in Jesus' time and place.

I need to be clear. Jesus' teachings have to do with private retaliation, not public order. These teachings are *not* about being a doormat, or passively accepting injustice or abuse. I would not counsel a wife—or a husband—to stay with a spouse who is abusing them or their children.

When someone hits you, it's only natural to hit back. It's almost a reflex, as most of us discover at a very young age with our siblings. Some years ago when a young man grabbed me on the subway, I—a mature adult and Southern-bred woman—swung instinctively and forcefully at him, shocking both him and myself. It was a good thing the train doors closed between us before that went any further. I was certainly not brought up to react that way, and had I thought even for one second, I would have concluded that was a dangerous move. But I wasn't thinking; the operative word is “react.”

When someone harms us, the natural reaction is to hit back physically, legally, verbally. When someone hates us, the natural reaction is to hate back.

But Jesus is calling us to a different way: to choose a loving response, rather than simply react and return measure for measure. Note that a loving response can also be a strong response. Loving and strong are not mutually exclusive.

Hear this contemporary interpretation by Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*:

You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. [God] gives [God's] best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and the bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up . . . Live out of your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

We are created in God's image, meaning we are created with the ability to choose. Rather than simply reacting, choose a response that honors your own dignity and your enemy's. Here's the flip side of that. This also calls us to think honestly: to whom am I acting as enemy? Whom do I want to harm, and why?

Love your enemies. That is a tough teaching any way you look at it. It seems “too high and too hard” for us, as Martin Luther said. Our tradition acknowledges as much. To all our baptism vows, which include promising to respect the dignity of every human being, we answer, “I will, with God's help.”

With God's help. And with the help of this community we're a part of. It's said you can't be a Christian by yourself; you can only be a Christian in community. It takes God's help, and the help and teaching and learning that comes from being part of a faithful, practicing community to live into Jesus' teachings.

So, back to all the visitors and newcomers who come here seeking God, community or whatever else, and whom we go to great lengths to welcome warmly and radically. Sometimes I think that under the rubric of full disclosure we should say something like: St. Bart's is a wonderful, faithful, occasionally fractious community trying as best we can to live the Gospel as we understand it. Yes, it's warm and friendly, but it's also challenging—See Appendix A: Love Your Enemies. Perhaps our logo should include the text, “Enter at your own risk.”

Annie Dillard has written, “It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.” [*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982]

Maybe we should start stocking crash helmets in St. Bart's store. Crash helmets with a tasteful yet surprising tiny St. Bart's dome on top. The Welcome Committee and Ushers can hand out life vests along with the service leaflets. Maybe our new cathedral chairs can have seat belts and a special compartment for storing the life vests, like on airplanes.

Yes, what we're about here, what Jesus calls us to be about is hard, it's risky, it's challenging. And it holds the most promise of anything I know.

To all of us, long-timers and newcomers alike, I say: Welcome. Welcome to this crazy, holy place. Welcome to this holy work of worship and serving and trying to follow Jesus as best we can.

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*For information about St. Bartholomew's
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