

Raising the Bar

Psalm 119:33-40

Matthew 5:38-48

February 23, 2020

The Reverend Heather Morrison Yaden
The Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township

I remember when I was a kid the gym class would have the Limbo sometimes – perhaps you remember that too -- we would try to go under the bar, and the bar would be lowered each time. I liked the calypso music and the dancing part. I was not very good at gym, and this was not any exception. The bar was a cut off, and people were eliminated if they could not make it under the bar.

To raise the bar means to set a high standard, to raise expectations, to set higher goals. The expression is often used in a situation where someone's performance surpasses the performances of others by far. The idiom *raise the bar* came into use around 1900 and comes from the sport of track and field. The high jump event and the pole vault event both involve raising a crossbar incrementally to see how high the participants can jump or pole vault.

As we listen to Jesus in Matthew 5, we recognize Jesus wants even more from us. Jesus was raising the bar. Jesus was asking more of us all. Jesus was saying to give the laws of God and the words of God more than lip service...to live them out in our daily lives.

What did Jesus mean by "Be perfect as God is perfect"? We will come back to that.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was asking us to put others before ourselves. To live in love. To love even, and perhaps especially, whoever we deem the unlovable.

Jesus was asking us to be disciples – to follow the path that Jesus walked and lived. Jesus was letting disciples know that the love of God comes not only to them, but to the very people that you might hope it would never come to.

Professor of New Testament Carla Works says that Jesus is telling the gathered crowd what it means to bear God's kingdom in the world.

"The principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" seems to be just. The punishment should fit the crime. Jesus, however, tells his followers not to resist one who is evil (5:39). In fact, when wronged, it is better to suffer more wrong than to retaliate unjustly.

These would-be kingdom bearers are not called to suffer passively, though. They are called to do the unthinkable. They are called to love those who persecute them and pray for them (5:43-44). In Matthew's Gospel love is not for the faint of heart (19:19; 22:37-39); Jesus' very mission is a demonstration of God's love."

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2034

When we think of those who practice this non-violent way of responding, we think of Mahatma Gandhi and the Salt March in India or Martin Luther King Jr. and those who taught the non-violent way of resisting injustice in this country's civil rights movement.

Gandhi once wrote that: the 'Sermon on the Mount' in the New Testament, "*went straight to my heart.*"

Professor of Biblical Studies Emerson Powery reminds us of the power of these verses: "*It is from Jesus' words (and his exposure to the practices of Mahatma Gandhi) that Martin Luther King, Jr. developed the practice of non-violence as a means of effective protest. Just as Jesus reinterpreted the biblical laws for his day, King put into practice their relevance for his own day. For King and others, Jesus' words were meant to be taken literally. Though not all Christians have responded in this way, a plan to retaliate evil with love was central to King's mission.*"

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=840

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his 1963 book Strength to Love:

"The whole Gandhian concept of Satyagraha (which means Truth Force or Love Force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of non-violence is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom..... Christ furnished the spirit and motivation and Gandhi furnished the method."

King, Martin Luther Jr. (1963), *Strength to Love: Pilgrimage to Non-Violence*, Glasgow: William Collins Sons Ltd, p. 151

Mohandas Gandhi greatly respected Jesus and drew inspiration from the life and teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Over the course of his life, Gandhi wrote of Jesus:

*"Jesus lived and died in vain if He did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love."*⁷

*"Jesus, a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act."*⁸

*"Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. His was non-violence par excellence."*⁹

https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gandhi_christ.html

The doctrine or the power of love can change the world, but first it has to change us. The way we live. The way we talk. The way we view others. The way we view and talk to ourselves. What would it look like if we took the power of love into the world, and into our daily lives?

Writer and theologian Amy Julia Becker answers that final question of ‘What did Jesus mean by “Be perfect as God is perfect”?’,

"In our culture, it is easy to create an identity based upon intellect or financial success or power. But if our identity is grounded in those things, we're going to find ourselves failing at some point. We're never going to be able to live up to our own standards, and at a certain point, we're literally not going to be able to continue to accomplish those goals.

But if our identity is based upon love, on the fact that God loves us for who we are, apart from what we do, then we can explore the things we love and find a deeper enjoyment from them."

On being told once that she had a perfect family,

*"Later, I remembered that verse from Matthew 5 where Jesus says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." I looked up the word and saw that in Greek, "perfect" comes from τέλος **telos**, which really means wholeness and completion more than perfection.*

When I think of perfection, I think of something that can't be improved or ever break down, like a perfect car. I think of it more in production terms and not in terms of wholeness, completion.

So "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" -- thinking about that in terms of being who you are created to be -- means to be one who is becoming whole, complete, mature.

That is a type of perfection that I can want for myself and my family, because it is a perfection that allows for weakness, for dependence on other people, for need and for giving and growing." <https://faithandleadership.com/amy-julia-becker-its-no-mistake-penny-perfect>

That is the power of love that Jesus was speaking of – lived out in life.

One last thing about the Limbo, it was originally a dance of faith and life from Africa and that came to Trinidad and Tobago which was danced at wakes as a part of the mourning: Traditionally, the limbo dance began at the lowest possible bar height and the bar was gradually raised, signifying an emergence from death into life. In its adaptation to the world of entertainment, troupes began reversing the traditional order.

So, in this way, Jesus was indeed raising the bar.