

Growing Up Together

Matthew 5:38-48
(The Message)

Again this Sunday, the Lectionary Gospel selection is from the gathered teachings of Jesus traditionally called “The Sermon on the Mount”. It is obvious that this is not one sermon - it contains at least 25 major points. Not even Jesus could keep a congregation’s attention through that long a sermon. Matthew gathered together many teachings of Jesus so that we have this wonderful anthology called the Sermon on the Mount. In our Gospel lesson today Jesus takes two familiar, old sayings, and challenges us to new depths in our relationships with each other.

The first “old saying” is about the circle of retaliation that rules so many relationships, from the personal to relations between nations; “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. Jesus says, “break that old cycle.” “No more tit-for tat stuff. Live generously”.

Jesus then picks up on the old saying; “Love your neighbor, your friend; hate the stranger, your enemy”. Jesus challenges that saying and challenges us: boldly and simply he says; “Love your enemies.” “If all you do is love the lovable, (big deal), 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.”

And then the punch line: “In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

Grow up!

- to our selfishness and greed, Jesus says GROW UP.
- to our need to get even, Jesus says GROW UP.
- to our fear of strangers, our hostility to those who differ from us, Jesus says GROW UP.

OK, What does it mean to be mature, adult, grown up?

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians writes: we are to grow to maturity, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ”. For us, Jesus is the picture, the pattern of what it looks like to be grown up.

But that's not so simple. It's not enough just to ask “**what would Jesus do?**”.

How does “what would Jesus do ?” help the teenager with his smart phone, busily preparing for collage entrance exams?

Can you even imagine Jesus texting?

How does ‘what would Jesus do?’ help the young women fresh out of college seeking a meaningful job?

She is confused enough about men already.

How does “what would Jesus do?” help gay men and lesbians seeking deep, loving relationships without much community support?

Would the Jesus they learned about in Sunday School be of any help?

And what about us old folk?

Jesus only lived to his mid-thirties.

Even if we accept that Jesus is for us the model of maturity, how do we live this out?

OK, this is where the “together” comes in. We cannot grow up alone.

An important part of that “together” is the Church - the faith community that you belong to. It is within this congregation that many of us are learning to grow up.

There are at least two ways that this happens:

First, we try to learn from all those who have gone before us.

In some churches this is called “Tradition”. It’s the stories of men and women who have lived mature spiritual lives. Early Christians like Frances of Assisi, and more contemporary, like Martin Luther King, and non-Christians like Mahatma Gandhi.

In more formal ways we learn from the Creeds and Confessions of the Church. The Presbyterian Church considers itself to be a Confessional Church, not a Creedal one. The difference being that a Creed tends to be thought of as a statement of beliefs that is binding upon the churches members. The Confessions, on the other hand are seen as the considered beliefs of a particular group at a particular time offered for the guidance of the people.

We often repeat the Apostles’ Creed as a way of witnessing to our identity with the whole Church. This is a liturgical act participated in by almost all Christians from early church history. Many now struggle with interpretation of the meanings of this Creed.

The Session is recommending that we all read, during the coming season of Lent, a book about the Apostles’ Creed entitled In Search of Belief. The author of this book is Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister and a very good writer. Starting early in March I will be teaching a four week course based on this book.

I need to confess that I have a lot of trouble with this creed. I have trouble with some things that it says and what it does not say. It says nothing about the teachings of Jesus, and almost nothing about his life.

The one thing the creed says about Jesus’ life is that he “suffered under Pontius Pilate”. Joan Chittister has helped me to see how very meaningful this one statement is.

Suffering is a really tough experience and it is hard to understand why Jesus suffered and why we suffer.

I want to say a couple of things about why Jesus suffered.

When I was young I was taught that God sent Jesus down to earth to die for my sin. God's righteousness demanded that sin be punished and that punishment was death. Somehow, when Jesus died on the Cross, his death substituted for mine and all other persons of the earth. All we had to do was accept him as our Lord and Savior and we were given eternal life. This is called the atonement model of God. As Joan Chittister writes, this "leaves us with a vengeful God, an angry God, a manipulative God, a feudal God, or a masochistic God." This tends to make Jesus' teaching irrelevant, and rather than helping us grow up, encourages us not to take responsibility for our own lives but to simply "hide in Jesus".

I have come to believe that Jesus lived and taught among us so that we might learn what it means to respond to God's love, to grow into what God intends of us. Yes, Jesus suffered, but not to please a vengeful, angry God. Jesus suffered because a world immersed in greed, oppression, and all that we call sin and destructiveness could not let him live. Jesus is my Lord and Savior not because of how he died but because of how he lived; how he showed and taught us of God's love.

Does this say that growing up like Jesus means we will suffer? No. Living means that we will suffer. We don't need to seek suffering - it will find us.

What this does mean is that suffering does not have to destroy us. Because Jesus suffered we can learn from him.

We must not seek suffering. It is not God's will that we suffer. But, for reasons we will never be able to fully understand suffering is a part of life. In following Jesus we can learn to grow up through our suffering.

I am glad that the Apostles Creed calls clearly to our attention that Jesus 'suffered'.

The **second** thing I want to say about growing up together is that you and I need the support of a vital community of faith if we are to grow up. Again let suffering be the lens through which we see this.

We surely have not sought it out, it is not God's will for us, but we as a congregation are experiencing lots of suffering right now; from prolonged

unemployment and economic stress, from serious illness, and from the death of those we love.

We bear these burdens together. We have no easy answers to questions of “why”. We must not hide, pretending all is well. All is not well. It hurts and we hate it. So, Jesus says: Grow up! This suffering will not destroy you. I’m in it with you. I’ve been there. Nothing will separate you from my love. Nothing will separate you from the love of God. Together we are able to see and live beyond our suffering.

We are able to rejoice with the signs of new life - **babies** born and baptized, **young people** growing up so quickly, seeking new experiences, reaching out with energy and hope, **couples; straight and gay-** who are finding new life together. Yes, and I hope you who are young can rejoice in us **old folk** who have lived through many years, still learning to grow up!

We are able to weep with those who cry. We are able to care for one another.

When Jesus says “Grow up. Live generously and graciously toward others the way God lives toward you” **we together can say YES.**