

He Started It

Many of you here this morning have spent time caring for little kids—either your own children or grandchildren, or your nieces and nephews, or your friends’ children. And probably more than a few of you have been asked to arbitrate a dispute that goes something like this:

“She hit me!”

“He hit me first!”

“She called me a dumbhead!”

“He stuck out his tongue at me!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“She broke my truck! She always gets into my stuff!”

“But he started it!”

I invite you now to imagine another setting. You are in a courtroom, serving on a jury. In a violent altercation, a man has sustained serious injuries. And another man is now on trial for inflicting those injuries. The prosecuting attorney contends that the attack was completely unprovoked. That the defendant is

guilty of the charges against him: assault with a deadly weapon. And attempted murder. But counsel for the defense insists that the injured party first attacked the defendant, and that the accused acted only in self-defense. In the judicial system of the state, the question you and your fellow jurors have to answer is: *Who started it?*

Now let's consider a third situation. A great nation is horrifically attacked by religious extremists. In one tragic day, thousands of innocent persons lose their lives. In retaliation, this world power invades a country where the perpetrators of this so-called "holy war" are believed to be. The conflict rages on as the years go by. The people of that great nation lose sons and daughters. Husbands and wives. Brothers and sisters. Fathers and mothers. On a battlefield halfway around the world. And in that faraway land, in what's referred to so impersonally as "collateral damage," more innocent civilians bleed and die.

In all of these scenarios, maybe Jesus' concern wouldn't be so much about who started it. Maybe Jesus would be asking: *Who's going to end it?*

On the playground, on the battlefield, and in so many places in between, is it *ever* going to be finished? We wonder.

Human aggression spirals and escalates. The stakes become higher. Wounds become deeper. Pain becomes more intense. Suffering increases. And hostilities continue, with no end in sight. Because it's all about retribution.

It was all about retribution in the ancient world. We think of people who lived in that time as warlike and brutal, especially when we hear about their code of justice. When we hear about their law of retaliation. *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.* Can you imagine people going around gouging out one another's eyes and knocking out one another's teeth? How uncivilized! How barbaric!

But unlike the nations around them, the people of ancient Israel had a statute in their law that actually *limited* vengeance. It was this same *eye for eye and tooth for tooth* law. It *restricted* your retaliation against someone who harmed you. If someone knocked out one of your teeth, you were not permitted to kill that person or even to knock out *all* of that person's teeth. You were allowed to knock out only *one* tooth. It was tit for tat. It was about getting even.

Still today, the world's mantra is: "Don't get mad, get *even!*" But the passion for revenge and retaliation is usually

accompanied by anger and sometimes even by hatred. These feelings gnaw and fester inside, hurting the one who harbors them *at least* as much as the one they're directed against.

And there's another drawback to this "eye for an eye" mindset. If someone hurts you and you feel compelled to strike back, you are allowing *someone else's* actions to determine *your* response. You're handing another person control over you and your emotions and the way you live your life.

So what are you and I to do? We're fallen human beings. We can throw up our hands in resignation and say: "There's nothing we can do about it. It's just our nature." Our sin-damaged human nature. Maybe you've been telling yourself that it's just the way things are. Maybe you've been telling yourself that it's just the way of the world.

If so, Jesus has good news for you today. The way of the world is not the only way! These past few Sundays and today, we've been reading his Sermon on the Mount. In his sermon we hear about another way to live. Jesus preaches about a different way. About a way that is the diametrical opposite of the world's way of getting even. The world's way of lashing out. The world's way of looking out for number one.

Jesus teaches about turning the other cheek. Jesus teaches about going the extra mile. Jesus teaches about giving the shirt off your back. Jesus teaches about giving to everyone who asks. Jesus teaches about lending to those in need without any thought of repayment. When we hear the Sermon on the Mount, we hear Jesus.

Through the words of his sermon, Jesus asks you not to let another person determine how you will react. Yes, someone else may have initiated the conflict. Yes, he or she may have started it. But how it gets *finished* is up to you—according to Jesus.

Through the words of his sermon, we come to know Jesus more clearly. We come to know that we are precious to him. We come to know that he wants only the best for us. We come to know that he wants us not to let our inner selves be eaten up by the corrosion of bitterness and grudges and cravings for payback opportunities.

Through the words of his sermon, Jesus is revealed. He's the One who charges you and me with treating others exactly the way we hope they will treat us—exactly the way we would like to be treated. That's what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

When Jesus talks about loving the neighbor, he's quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures we heard this morning. All those *shalls* and *shall nots* we hear in Leviticus—all those instructions about how we are and are not to treat others—they all spring from this one commandment: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

My brothers and sisters, what Jesus wants you and me to understand today is that the people called *neighbors* include not only friends, but enemies as well. One of our favorite Bible verses—John three sixteen—tells us just how much God loves *the world*. The world! Not only those who walk in God's way. Not only those who are like us. Not only those who *like* us. And not only those *we* like. As Jesus illustrates with his story of the Good Samaritan, there are no limitations on who our neighbors are. God loves *all* our neighbors—both friends *and* enemies—and wills that we love them, too.

So our task, our mission, is learning to love as God loves. That's what Jesus means when he tells us to be perfect even as God is perfect. Perfect in love. Being perfect in love doesn't mean that we will never make an honest mistake. Being perfect in love *does* mean that when you love God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your might—in other words, when you love God with your whole being—and when you love your neighbor as yourself, there’s no room left in you for anything *but* love.

We rēad these words of Jesus about being perfect. John Wesley rēad them, too. Wesley affirms that it is possible to be led to perfection *in this life*. But even though we stand in Wesley’s tradition, this teaching isn’t easy for us to accept. Maybe that’s because the world’s conventional wisdom has been engrained in us. It sounds something like this: “Only Jesus was perfect. And I’m not Jesus—that’s for sure! So why should I even bother *trying* to be perfect?”

It “may seem too high a goal to imagine. It certainly *is* too high if we [don’t] aim for it or [if we] see it as eternally beyond our reach,” as Taylor Burton-Edwards points out.

But perfection in love is what Jesus calls us to. We humans were the ones who started quarreling and fighting and seeking vengeance. God in Christ Jesus, the One we follow, is the origin, the source of perfection in love. What better reason could there be to strive toward it as a goal?

It's interesting that the word our Bibles translate as *perfection* actually means *goal*. Actually means *end-product*. Perfection in love is a destination. It's *our* destination. We despair of ever being able to get there by ourselves. You and I can't. But—thanks be to God!—you don't *have to* get there by yourself. You have help along the way.

On your journey, sanctifying grace keeps working in you, transforming you into the son or the daughter you were meant to be. You have been created in God's image. And within every human creature, no matter how sin-sick, there glows a spark of that beautiful image of God. The Spirit of Christ takes that spark. The Spirit of Christ restores and renews the image of God in you. The Spirit of Christ guides you into the life of holiness.

And, beloved, Christ himself leads you. Christ himself, with his grace-filled life, offers you an example to follow, a model to imitate. For he loves even enemies. And he commands you to do the same. Now that's a tall order. It can come to pass only through prayer to the One through whom all things are possible.

Jesus invites you to pray for those who would affront. For those who would hurt. For those who would persecute. Your

prayers may not change *them*. But prayer changes you and me. The intimacy of prayer enables and empowers you to reach out in love to both friend and foe. To become more loving. To become more like our loving Lord, who in the agony of the cross prayed for his executioners. *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*

Unfathomable, inconceivable, unconditional love. Perfect love.

He started it!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.