

SERMON  
First Lutheran Church  
Aitkin, Minnesota

Matthew 5:38-48  
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen  
February 23, 2014

**CHILDREN'S MESSAGE** (Brainerd Dispatch, Feb. 18, 2014)

Kids, **Caleb Pence** just celebrated his **seventh birthday**. Are any of you seven? Caleb lives over by Brainerd. Caleb has **brittle bone disease**. He has already broken at least **11 bones** including a leg, an arm, a foot and his pelvis. Well, now that the doctors have figured out what is wrong with Caleb, he can go to the hospital and get a **transfusion of medicine** that makes his bones stronger. He has to do this four times a year, and each time he goes, he has to stay in the hospital for 3 days.

The first time that Caleb went to **Gillette Children's Hospital**, he was very **scared** about what might happen. The nice people there gave him a little bag full of pipe cleaners, crayons, fabric squares, glue sticks, stickers and googly eyes... That little bag of stuff to play with helped make Caleb feel better about his hospital visit. But, by the next time Caleb came for his medicine, those fun bags had all been used up.

So, when Caleb celebrated his **seventh birthday**, his parents asked him what he wanted for a gift, and he told them he wanted everyone in his family and at his church to help make more bags for Gillette Children's Hospital so that all of the kids who come there can be comfortable and have fun even though they are sick and need medicine or doctor care. Now the hospital has more bags to give to kids. They call them "**Caleb's Imagination Kits**."

How many of you have ever been very sick, maybe had to go to the doctor or even to the hospital? Anyone can get sick. In fact, most of us will get sick or have some kind of troubles sometimes in our lives. Caleb is very sick with that terrible brittle bone disease, but did you see? Caleb still was able to think about other kids who are also sick. And he was even able to do something to help those other kids to get through their sickness better.

Kids, the **world sometimes isn't just the way that God would like it to be**. We get sick. We get lost. We get hurt. We aren't sure what to do. **But, God has promised** to be there for us, to help us, to get us through one way or another. And even when we are sick or have troubles in our lives, God makes it **possible for us to help others**. In fact, when we help others, it **even helps us to get better too**. Thanks be to God. Amen.

## **ADULT MESSAGE**

In today's Gospel text, Jesus says, "**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**"

When Lutherans read the Bible, we always look for:

1. What is the **basic truth** that God is telling us in this passage?
2. What is the **most hopeful word** or **best good news** in the text?
3. Where is the **grace of God** somehow moving in what is written?

And we believe that **Living Word, Jesus** will literally come out of the scriptures and speak to us **where we are** and **what we need to hear**.

We don't focus upon every detail. We look at **big picture**. We look for what was the **context/situation** that was going on in and around our text:

1. When the event **happened**.
2. When the Gospel text/ passage was **written down**, often years later.
3. How does this **square with the whole Bible?**
4. How does this **square with what Jesus taught and did?**

Then finally we ask, "**What does all of this mean for us today?**"

We have had some very difficult/troubling texts to relate to in recent weeks. We have been hearing passages from **Jesus' Sermon on the Mount** from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew wrote his Gospel account of Jesus to the Jewish people. Matthew works very hard to point out all of the **Old Testament connections** that there are with Jesus. Matthew spends a lot of time focusing upon "**the Law**" which was so central for the Jews.

Lutherans believe that "**the Law**" was given to us by God in order to:

1. **Preserve our lives** (keep us safe from untimely death) long enough for us to hear "**the Gospel**" – the Good News about God's loving, saving work through Jesus to save all people.
2. **To kill us** – to show us that **we can't be good enough** to save ourselves, that we need a Savior, Jesus, for true life and salvation.

Yet, Jesus, in our Gospel text for today says, "**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" Maybe we are saved by being good enough? Before Jesus tells his listeners to be perfect he says,

- “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, **“Do not resist an evildoer. But if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”**
- “and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, **give your cloak as well;**”
- “if anyone forces you to go one mile, **go also the second mile.**”
- **“Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”**

Jesus, in our Gospel text for today says,

- “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,**
- **so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;**
- **for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”**

Jesus concludes our text by saying,

- “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”
- “And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”
- **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

In our Gospel text from **Matthew 5:38-48**, Jesus said these things. **What Jesus says here literally flies in the very face of everything that our world teaches.**

Why bother with the church anymore? Christianity is just a crazy myth like all of the other world religions. Forget about God. The world is an accident, a chance occurrence. When you look at a snowflake, a sunrise or a bumble bee, these are not divine handiwork, but simply a result of the “Big Bang” and of millions of years of evolution. Forget all of the religious stuff and do your own thing. Make your own way in the world. Look out for number one. When you die you die. Period.

- Get revenge when you are wronged.
- Return insult for insult
- Hang onto every last piece of junk that you have.
- Don’t trust anybody, least of all some unseen God.

- Hate your enemies, or even those who just happen to disagree with your political persuasion.
- Love only those who deserve it, or who can love you back...

**It is crazy that any of us are even here in worship together today...**

**OR, is God real?**

- And did Jesus live, walk this earth, die and then come back to life for the salvation (healing or wholeness) of all people?
- And is the Holy Spirit, not only here today, but also the One who brought us here?
- And has God literally chosen to give life and to bless the world through us?
- And are we starting here and now, today, in God's Living Word, grounded, filled, inspired and sent to be God's own Children in God's own world?

Do you see? There is more to this text than meets the eye at first read.

- An eye for an eye was an ancient limitation on retribution. Before that provision if someone did harm to your family, you went back and did even more harm to their family and then they came back and one-upped the harm inflicted on your family. An eye for an eye meant equal payment and then the fight stops. Jesus **now** says, "**No more retribution, the fighting stops immediately.**"
- The slap on the right cheek was an insult, a put-down. Jesus says, "**Take the insult and ask for more, rather than fight.**"
- If someone takes your "coat" that is your undergarment. If you give them your "cloak" that is the outer garment which for a poor person served as coat during the day and as blanket during the night. Jesus says, "**Better to be naked than to fight.**"
- Roman soldiers, the hated enemy, could legally force a Jew to help carry the soldier's gear for one mile. Jesus says, "**Go the extra mile.**" Oh, that's where that saying comes from.
- "Love your neighbor" is the second greatest commandment. Only loving God is more important. However, there is nothing in the Bible about hating your enemy. That attitude was probably deeply entrenched in the hearts of the people however, just like it is today. Jesus says, "**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.**" Jesus says in God's kingdom, there is **no room for hate**. And he uses the "**agape**" form of love which doesn't mean "**like**" your enemy. It means to be **concerned for the well-**

**being** of your enemy. Agape love is self-sacrificial. That is the kind of love Jesus demonstrated when he said from that cross, **“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”**

And here is a really, really crazy thing that Jesus said, **“(God) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”** Do you see it? God, the one so many folks don’t think exists, gives the most basic elements of life, sun and rain, to everyone – good or bad, rich or poor, American or enemies. **That’s how LOVING, FORGIVING, GENEROUS and HOPEFUL God is.**

And Jesus offers to us, that **we might also participate** with God in such **gracious generosity** to the people and world around us. Jesus says that if we do such crazy things as these, we may be the **“children of our Father in heaven.”** So we do earn our way into God’s Family then?

No, this brings us back to the **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** In our world, in our math, being perfect means something like getting all of the answers right on the test, finishing all the work, paying our way. In God’s world, **being perfect is a little bit like planting a tree.** You put the seed in the ground, sun shines, rain falls, tree grows and ultimately begins to bear fruit. The tree matures to the place where it lives in the way it was created to live. Apple tree bears good apples. The Greek word perfect comes from **“teleios”** which speaks of **maturing**, living into what God has created us to be. Perfect means reaching the goal of a **rich, deep sharing in the life of God**, the nature of God. It means letting Father God move in and through our everyday lives.

**Basic truth:** The way the world teaches us to do things **doesn’t square with the way God wants things done.**

**Most hopeful word:** God invites us, not to earn our way into being children of God, but to live **like the children of God that we already are,** sisters and brothers of Jesus, truly caring for all the people in the world.

**Grace of God:** **God loves everybody,** even the ones who don’t believe God exists. **God doesn’t give up on anybody** – you, me, our enemy or theirs...

**Jesus said,** “Be **perfect**, therefore, as your **heavenly Father** is perfect.” So sometimes we pray, **“Our Father who art in heaven... Thy will be done...”** and mean it. That’s because we are children of God. And that is **very good news.** Thanks be to God. Amen.