**Who really loves God?**

A sermon by The Rev. Chris Wendell

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

When I meet with families who are newly arrived in our church community, I often ask a question like, “So, what brought you through our doors?” The answers vary widely. But at least half the time, it includes some version of “I want my family, my children, to have good values…and church seems like a good place to work on this.” I agree, churches are good places to work on living a more values-driven life, a life that more fully aligns our practices and choice-making with the aspirations we hold for ourselves and for the world. *And* I think when well-meaning new parents have these intentions (myself included) we have no idea what we’re in for. Living a good Christian is not easy, for a lot of reasons.

To start, there’s always some distance between how we live and how we’d like to live. That gap is kind of what it means to be an imperfect human. Being a Christian, in some sense, is about shrinking that gap. It’s about structing and ordering our lives so that they come to more fully reflect the values we profess. But, here’s the hard part. Being a Christian is also about enlarging that gap – not by giving up on living a values-driven life, but by continually challenging ourselves to set the “values bar” closer and closer to the high ideals that Jesus offers us.

And high they are. We’re going to talk about that in a minute – because Jesus’ dream for how we should live is pretty radical. But before we do, I think we need to sit with this idea for a second that the moral life of Christians is about both shrinking the values gap and expanding it at the same time. This is not an easy tension to hold within our hearts, right? We want to attain some kind of goodness, some kind of holiness of life. So we set some values goals, and we try to meet them. When we don’t meet them, we challenge ourselves to keep trying to close the gap. But when we do meet them, our reward is to realize that our moral goals have been too small, that we are ready for a deeper challenge. In a way, Jesus is always moving the goalposts on us. Always challenging us to a way of life, to a way of love, that is more and more counter cultural. That invites more and more self-giving, more generosity of spirit, more humility.

So we need to make sense of what appears like a catch-22 for Christian moral living: making moral progress in our lives simply increases the expectations. We want to know how much is enough. We want to know how good to we need to be? After all no one is perfect, this side of Eden. On its face, the never-closing gap just feels unfair. It might even provoke a kind of moral despair in us. At the lowest points, it could cause one to simply abandon the whole project of ethical, holy living because perfection is unattainable.

I think, perhaps, the way through this kind of moral fatigue or despair at the “moving goalposts” of Christian ethics, is to examine our root motivation for living a good life in the first place. Why do we want our children to be good? Why do we want to be good? To be holy.

There’s a saying attributed to Theresa of Avila, that goes something like this. “I had a vision and in my dream the Angel came to me holding a bucket of water in one hand and a torch in the other. What will you do with that bucket, and what will you do with that torch, I asked. The angel said, with the torch, I’m going to burn down all the palaces of heaven. And with the bucket, I’m going to extinguish the flames of Hell. Why are you doing that? I asked the angel. The angel replied, Because then, we’ll know who truly loves God.”

This bit of holy wisdom is pithy, but it makes a good point. If our desire to live a moral life, a values-driven life, is to attain some kind of reward or escape some kind of punishment, then we will always be focused on succeeding. We will need to know what constitutes “enough goodness”. And we will need to be able to measure how close or far we are to its attainment. Most problematically, we will be stubbornly unwilling to “move the goalposts” as we get close to them.

Theresa’s wisdom survives because she doesn’t just diagnose the problem, she offers a re-direction. What if the quest for the Christian moral life is rooted not in feeling virtuous, nor in fearing any kind of punishment, but instead in wanting to love God more fully. What if loving God was the reason we want to be good? And by loving God, I mean loving the vision, the dream, the hope that God has for humanity and how we might live on this earth in peace, in harmony, in love? What if our moral commitment to that vision, and not our fears about whether or not humanity will ever achieve it, was the reason why we wanted to live a good life?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus articulates one of the highest and most difficult ethical challenges. Loving our enemies. Do good to those who hate you. To those who take your shirt, give them your coat too. To those who strike you, do not strike back. Let them strike you again. When people ask you for things, give them what they ask for. Be merciful to all.

It’s an incredible ask. Jesus has moved the goalposts WAY down the field. And remember, Jesus is talking to people who are generally disempowered here. He’s not talking to the wealthy and the privileged and the powerful. He’s talking to people who are often the victims of aggression, theft, and violence. And he is saying “Don’t retaliate.” It’s not like a hockey coach who tells his players not to retaliate because, you know, the ref only ever sees the second punch. No, this isn’t about pragmatism or self-preservation. It’s about refusing to participate in unjust systems. Jesus is saying resist the urge to participate in the economy of violence and aggression, because it’s wrong. Let the scandal of the strong using force upon the weak to steal, to control, to enrich, be seen for what it is in all its brutality. Love a God, a vision, a dream, that makes no room for malice, even towards those who deserve it, even at great cost to yourself. Conduct yourself with dignity at all times. At *all* times. Even the hardest times.

Perhaps this feels like too high a moral ask to you. Fair enough. It might be. We live in a broken world in which the nature of being human means we can’t fully close the gap between the ethical ideal and our actual conduct. We might need to protect ourselves at times because the world is harsh and aggressive and sometimes violent. And if we have little power, little resource, little safety, we may be forced to protect ourselves to survive. And we should.

But, what if we’re not the generally disempowered? What if our survival isn’t at stake…just our comfort. What if our participation in the economy of aggression and theft and violence is making our lives better, perhaps indirectly, perhaps in ways we never see because systems of production and resource exploitation are often hidden from us? Then how can we say to those with far less power than we, “Don’t retaliate” when we are unwilling to reduce our participation in these unjust systems even though the costs to us of opting out are far smaller?

I realize this is complicated, but it’s so important. We live in a world of vast economic, political, and social inequality. And it divides us from one another. And we feel so helpless to do anything about it. It feels like we’ll never succeed.

The good news of Jesus today is that we are not helpless. We have moral agency. And yes, it’s a high bar. And yes, it’s counter-cultural. But if we want to live in a world without violence, without retaliation, then we must realize how far the goalposts are down the field. We must reduce our participate in the economy of aggression and violence – in how we spend, in how we vote, in how we earn. We must not be afraid that we won’t succeed. Because success is not the point. The point is to love the possibility that the world will change. The point is to hold that hope. To commit our lives to God’s dream made real in Jesus, even if it’s never fully made real in us. Because it’s our striving that matters, not our success. It’s our striving that enables us to take a breath at the end of the day and know we’ve done good, even if the gap remains. And it’s then, when we can feel good about our lives as moral works in progress, that we’ll know that we really love God. Amen.