

Sermon for February 19, 2017
"My Father's Child"

Matthew 5:38-48

Do you look like your parents? I look like my mother. I once found a picture of her when she was a child about the same age I was when I found the picture and the similarity of our faces was uncanny. Kaitlyn has that same collection of facial features. We have a picture of Melissa when she was a baby and another picture of Mary, and they look like two picture of the same baby.

But it goes beyond that. Often our children have similar behaviors. Sometimes our children do things that remind us so much of ourselves when we were that age we have to laugh in joy. Then at times they do things that we swear they got from our spouse's side of the family but we secretly know we acted the same way. Either way we can, as the old country saying goes, tell who their parents are.

Are you like your Father? I don't mean here your earthly father. Are you like your Heavenly Father? Can people look at your life and see the same features in you that they see in your Heavenly Father? Can people look at you and see glimpses of your Father in Heaven? And when they look at your life, do they say "I know who their Father is."

Jesus told his disciples how to act to "be children of your Father in heaven." So how should we act to reflect who we are as children of God? First Jesus said, "if anyone 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; and 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." (39-42) All of this is under the heading of "do not resist evildoers." Each of the examples tells the disciples to do more than simply not fight back. Rather it tells them to do more.

One might think that this would lead to being used as a doormat. I have known people who thought that Christians were supposed to do whatever they asked them to. They thought Christians were door mats that they could walk all over.

There is a deliberate contrast with the world's point of view. The world says "Do unto others before they can do it unto you." The world says "Look out for number one" – "Me first!" The world says "Don't get mad, get even."

But is that how God acts toward us? Does God seek to get us back for all the things we have done to God and to God's children? No! Not only does God not try to get us back, the Lord actually gave himself. The human race slapped God on the cheek and sought to hijack the religion God gave God's children. They killed the prophets, yet God turned the other cheek and sent the Son to die for that same human race. If God's Son can die for the very people doing violence to him, perhaps we need to sacrifice for the people that do violence in our world. Then we will truly be children of our Father in Heaven.

The next thing Jesus says seems to get to the heart of the matter. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." A few years back at another church I served we asked people to pledge their prayers during Lent. We actually had a pledge card and people could pledge to read their Bible's daily or pray for the church or something like that. One of the options on the card was "Pray for your enemies." I had one member of this church who came to me and said, "I pledged to pray for my enemies, but I am not sure how to pray. Should I pray for a quick death or a slow death?" I said a slow death - so they have time to repent.

Somehow I don't think that is the spirit in which Jesus intended this teaching. Jesus said, "God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." Now in the Holy Land rain was a blessing. So God blesses both the good and the bad with sun and rain, both of which are necessary for life. If God blesses both, then we too should bless them by praying for them. Those prayers can include prayers that they straighten out their lives. But mainly they should be for their ultimate well being, physical and spiritual.

In contrast with the world which says you should love your friends and hate others, Jesus said, "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?" (46-47) Are we children of the world like the tax collectors and sinners who love only those who are part of their inner circle of supporters? Or are we children of our Heavenly Father who loves all equally? Our love should reach beyond the boundaries of our family and friends and even those who are nice to us. Then we can be children of our Heavenly Father.

Now all that is hard to do. To turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. It is difficult to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. Sure Jesus did it all, but he was God come in the flesh – the incarnation of God! It is a little harder for us mere mortals.

But what Jesus says next is harder still. He said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Wait just a minute here! Nobody's perfect – well, except God and Jesus. How can we be perfect?

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught a doctrine of "Christian Perfection." He believed that if Jesus told us to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect, then Jesus would make it possible, by Grace, for us to be perfect. We will always make mistakes so we may not be perfect in that sense. But by the grace of God, and with the Holy Spirit's help, we can resist the sin we know of in the here and now, and do the good we are aware of at this time. Like a child, we can resemble our Heavenly Father, but only as a small child resembles their parent. I remember my daughters when they were very small playing with the dolls. We would say, "It is time to put the baby to bed," and they would grab the doll by the foot and drag its head on the ground over to the doll crib. Then they would lift it by the foot and drop it in the crib head first. Such behavior would warrant a call to DSS! But for a 2 or 3 year old it is the best imitation of a good parent that they can give. In the same way our imitation of our Heavenly Father may not be as kind and loving as God would want, but it may be the best that our level of maturity allows. Hence we can reflect the perfection of our Heavenly Father but only as children – an immature reflection.

So I ask you again: Are you like your Heavenly Father? Do you reflect God's love and grace? Do you sacrifice for those who do wrong? Do you turn the other cheek like Jesus did?

Do you love your enemies? Will you pray for their salvation? Will you go out of your way to love them or even make sacrifices for them?

Do you want to be like your Father? God is perfect in love. Sure, you are limited by your own humanness. But are you ready to love in the way that you are capable of as an immature child of your Heavenly Father?

But if you are not like your Father in Heaven, who are you like? Would you be mistaken for a child of the world? Could someone look at you and think you are the offspring of selfishness or greed or prejudice or materialism? Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. Then you will be truly children of your Father in Heaven!