

## **“Can We Be Open to the Promise of a New Way?”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, February 19, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

### ***Family Day Weekend***

Scripture Readings: I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

You have heard that it was said “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” but I say “Do not resist an evil doer.” That’s enough – we’ve heard more than we need to hear.

Not the way the world works today, or in fact at any time in history. With few examples – the patient perseverance and forgiving attitude of Nelson Mandela comes to mind – most of the world’s history has been marked at getting even with those who wrong us – or at least try to get even.

But in case you wonder why I cut the passage short it does continue to tell us that if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other one and let him hit that too; and if someone wants your blazer, give your overcoat as well, and if anyone asks you for money, give it to them and refuse no one.

These are definitely counter-cultural teachings, and would not be supported by many people, or even all Christians, today.

What makes the teachings so radical is the fact that the teachings of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was the moderate new law of the day. You see, before that litany of punishment came about, almost any punishment that embarrassed and debilitated a criminal was appropriate. Steal a loaf of bread? Cut off his hand. Look a little too longingly at your neighbour’s property? Pluck out the eye. Steel a lamb from another’s flock? Take all of the offender’s animals.

The punishment now was to fit the crime, or so the laws were meant to indicate.

But Jesus came with a whole new philosophy – maybe understanding the reasons for crime and sense of hopelessness was more important than strident punishment and expanding prisons.

I started the announcements with a story of a child’s wisdom, so let me share another story of a wise young woman.

This girl was in grade six when she experienced the greatest humiliation anyone could ever experience – at least in her eyes. She failed an exam.

Getting less than a “B” was upsetting enough whenever that happened in her life, but fail? How could she face her parents? How could she face herself?

What disappointed her even more was this was a test for one of her most favourite teachers. She reread the test and thought she deserved more marks for some of her answers, but since she really was wise beyond her years, she knew that asking for a remarking of the test would never work. But in adding up the marks in the margin she was convinced the marks added up to 50 – not the 49 she was given.

With some confidence she went to the teacher and asked him to recount the marks – he may have missed a mark in the counting.

He counted and recounted the paper, but handed it back, shaking his head and said there were no more marks to be had.

It was a seminal part of her life, and years later she listed what this event meant to her. Her lessons were significant:

- 1) I can fail a test and that does not make me a bad person.
- 2) My life ultimately is defined not by the marks I get on a test, but how I treat people.
- 3) I have a right to be angry with someone who has done something with which I disagree, but life is too short to hold a grudge.

Out of the mouths of the young great truths often emerge.

Jesus also knew the truth of what this young woman recounted in later years. Life is too short to hold a grudge, to try to get even for what happens to us, and we need to spend less time holding anger and being upset, and, instead, spend more time seeking peace and holding others in prayer.

Years ago before moving to Toronto to be involved in a downtown pastorate there, the Outreach committee of that church took a tour of the downtown. Though it was a couple of months before I began my work there, I joined the group, paid my \$25.00, and spent 5 hours touring the downtown with a Downtown Church Workers Guide.

These tours were ways that former street people both made some money to help them in their rent as they tried to establish a new life, and also allowed them to teach church people about the realities of downtown living in that city.

We were told to wear very casual, even scruffy, clothes, and to have only one dollar in our pockets. No wallet, no credit cards. We toured alleys and backstreets where people had make-shift beds and discarded syringes could be found; we saw drug deals happening, and were directed to, but did not enter, more foreboding places where the tour guide herself suggested going down that way was too dangerous.

At the end, our guide was asked what she thought about how we should respond to people on the street who use drugs or who are inebriated as they ask for help. “You know almost for sure,” continued the questioner, “whatever money they will receive will go to their addictions.”

She replied in a very forthright and clear manner: “I was always thankful for those who helped me out when I was at my lowest on the streets; if I did not get help, even though I was abusing my body with drugs and alcohol, I could die. I was thankful for people who helped me no matter what my condition.”

And so Jesus has said: “Help others no matter what.” It is an entreaty I, for one, find difficult to follow, and accept. But then again, Jesus’ message has usually been much clearer than it has been easy.