

Matthew 5:38-48

February 19, '17

“THE HARD OF THE GOSPEL”

I WANT TO START THIS MORNING WITH A QUESTION, BUT I HESITATE TO DO SO BECAUSE I RUN THE RISK OF LOSING YOU FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE SERMON.

IF I DO, THOUGH, PERHAPS YOUR ANSWER TO THE QUESTION WILL TAKE YOU IN THE DIRECTION YOU NEED TO GO FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES.

HERE IT IS.

WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE ABOUT JESUS?

OVER THE YEARS, THE FILM WORLD HAS GIVEN US A LOT OF POSSIBLE ANSWERS ALONG WITH A TREMENDOUS VARIETY IN THE DEPICTIONS OF JESUS.

FOR SOME OF YOU, IT MIGHT BE ONE OF THE MORE RECENT FILMS LIKE MEL GIBSON'S "*THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST.*"

I'D TELL YOU WHERE THAT ONE WOULD RANK IN MY PERSONAL LIST BUT I'VE NEVER SEEN IT SO I CAN'T.

MAYBE YOU GO WAY BACK TO "*KING OF KINGS*" WITH ACTOR JEFFREY HUNTER PORTRAYING A VERY AMERICANIZED JESUS.

OR MAYBE IT'S ONE OF THE MUSICAL PRESENTATIONS OF THE GOSPEL STORY LIKE "*JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR,*" "*GODSPELL,*" OR EVEN JOHNNY CASH'S "*GOSPEL ROAD.*"

ANOTHER POSSIBILITY MIGHT BE THE HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL MARTIN SCORCESE FILM, "*THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST.*"

**WHAT AN ODD, THOUGH EXTREMELY WELL
DONE & INCREDIBLY THOUGHT-PROVOKING MOVIE.**

**ONE OF *MY* FAVORITES IS THE 8-HOUR FRANCO
ZEFFIRELLI TELEVISION MINI-SERIES “*JESUS OF
NAZARETH.*”**

**ASIDE FROM THE FACT THAT IT WAS A PRETTY
FAITFHUL RE-TELLING OF WHAT WE FIND IN THE
GOSPELS, THE JESUS PRESENTED BY ACTOR ROBERT
POWELL WAS EXACTLY WHAT MOST OF US THINK
OF WHEN WE THINK OF JESUS.**

**I THINK THAT MAY BE A KEY FACTOR IN HOW
WE RATE MOVIES ABOUT JESUS.**

**ROBERT POWELL & JIM CAVIEZEL NAIL IT –
JEFFREY HUNTER & “*SUPERSTAR’S*” TED NEELEY –
NOT SO MUCH.**

THERE WAS AN OBSCURE BBC TELEVISION PLAY CALLED “*SON OF MAN*,” THAT I THINK I WOULD LIST AS MY SECOND FAVORITE “JESUS” FILM.

IT HAS, AS ITS LEAD CHARACTER, PERHAPS THE MOST BIZARRE-LOOKING JESUS EVER CAST!

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO MIGHT REMEMBER THE ROCK GROUP, JETHRO TULL, THE GUY WHO PLAYS JESUS IN THIS FILM REMINDS ME OF THE COVER OF THE “AQUALUNG” ALBUM.

THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD IS PORTRAYED AS SOMEWHAT STOUT, SHORTER THAN AVERAGE & SPORTING A FACE THAT ONLY HIS MOTHER MARY COULD LOVE!

IN ESSENCE, YOU MIGHT SAY THAT JESUS IS A REGULAR GUY – HE’S ONE OF US.

IT'S NOT JUST HIS LOOKS, THOUGH, THAT MAKE HIM A DIFFERENT KIND OF MOVIE JESUS.

IT'S THE WAY HE WALKS & THE WAY HE TALKS. IN ONE ABSOLUTELY UNFORGETTABLE SCENE – THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – AND, IN PARTICULAR, THE PASSAGE WE'VE JUST READ – JESUS SAUNTERS THROUGH A CROWD OF RATHER SEEDY-LOOKING CHARACTERS WHO AREN'T SURE IF THEY SHOULD TAKE THIS GUY SERIOUSLY.

WHEN HE REALIZES THEIR SKEPTICISM, HE STOPS & THEN, IN UTTER FRUSTRATION, EXPLODES WITH “*LISTEN TO ME, LISTEN TO ME, I WANT YOU PEOPLE TO LISTEN TO ME!*”

YOU SEE, I THINK THIS IS PERHAPS A MUCH MORE REALISTIC PORTRAYAL OF JESUS THAN WHAT WE SO OFTEN GET IN MOVIES.

**I THINK THE SKEPTICISM OF THE PEOPLE IS
REAL AS IS HIS FRUSTRATION WITH THEM.**

**THINGS THAT JESUS SAID WEREN'T EASY TO
HEAR.**

**CHALLENGES HE PUT FORTH WEREN'T EASY TO
ACCEPT.**

**DEMANDS THAT HE MADE WEREN'T EASY TO
FOLLOW.**

**THESE WORDS WE'VE JUST READ MAY BE AT
THE TOP OF THE LIST OF THINGS THAT *WERE* – AND
ARE - DIFFICULT ABOUT THE MESSAGE JESUS CAME
TO PROCLAIM.**

THIS IS “THE HARD OF THE GOSPEL.”

**IF IT SEEMS AS IF THAT WORD DOESN'T FIT – IF
IT SEEMS AS THOUGH THE MORE LOGICAL PHRASE**

**TO USE WOULD BE “THE *HEART* OF THE GOSPEL,”
WELL – SO BE IT.**

**“THE HARD OF THE GOSPEL” IS “THE HEART OF
THE GOSPEL.”**

**I THINK WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO
MISUNDERSTAND THESE WORDS OF JESUS AND, IN
THAT MISUNDERSTANDING, WE GO TO EITHER ONE
EXTREME OR THE OTHER.**

**WE EITHER TAKE THEM *TOO* SERIOUSLY OR WE
DON’T TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY *ENOUGH*.**

EITHER EXTREME CAN BE DANGEROUS.

**AS A SIMPLE EXAMPLE, TAKE THE COMMAND
“*IF SOMEONE STRIKES YOU ON THE RIGHT CHEEK,
TURN THE OTHER ALSO.*”**

**UNFORTUNATELY, THAT COMMAND HAS
ACTUALLY BEEN USED TO JUSTIFY ABUSE – ABUSE
OF A SPOUSE, A CHILD OR A SUBSERVIENT WORKER.**

**THAT CLEARLY IS NOT WHAT JESUS MEANT &
THAT’S THE DANGER IN TAKING A COMMAND SUCH
AS THIS *TOO SERIOUSLY*.**

**ON THE OTHER HAND, WE CAN GO TO THE
OPPOSITE EXTREME & NOT TAKE THESE WORDS OF
JESUS SERIOUSLY *ENOUGH*.**

**WE HEAR “THE HARD OF THE GOSPEL” AND WE
JUST THROW OUR HANDS UP IN DESPAIR & GIVE UP.**

**WE DON’T EVEN TRY TO FOLLOW HIS
COMMANDS BECAUSE THEY’RE FAR TOO DIFFICULT
& WE SIMPLY THROW OURSELVES ON THE MERCY
OF HIS FORGIVENESS FOR OUR FAILURES.**

**BUT THAT’S NOT WHAT JESUS EXPECTS OF US
EITHER.**

**NOT TAKING HIS COMMANDS SERIOUSLY
ENOUGH IS NO BETTER THAN TAKING HIS
COMMANDS *TOO* SERIOUSLY.**

SO WHAT’S THE ANSWER?

WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

**HOW ARE WE TO PROPERLY UNDERSTAND
THESE TEACHINGS?**

**MAYBE THERE’S A THIRD WAY OF HEARING
“THE *HARD* OF THE GOSPEL” THAT IS REALLY “THE
HEART OF THE GOSPEL.”**

**MAYBE JESUS ISN’T TELLING US WHAT TO DO IN
EVERY SITUATION OF LIFE AS MUCH AS HE’S
TELLING US HOW TO LOVE.**

MAYBE HE’S TELLING US HOW TO LIVE WITH INTEGRITY & DIGNITY AS HIS FOLLOWERS.

MAYBE HE’S TELLING US HOW TO ALLOW THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT THAT PAUL TALKS ABOUT – LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS & SELF-CONTROL – TO THRIVE WITHIN US.

WHEN YOU LOOK AT THESE SPECIFIC SITUATIONS HE MENTIONS HERE, YOU HAVE TO CONSIDER THE AUDIENCE TO WHOM HE WAS SPEAKING.

WHEN HE SAYS “*IF ANYONE,*” THE PEOPLE WOULD HAVE KNOWN WHO “*ANYONE*” REPRESENTED.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SOMEONE WHO HAD CONTROL & AUTHORITY.

IN EACH SITUATION MENTIONED – THE SLAP ON THE CHEEK, THE CLOTHES OFF THE BACK, THE DEMAND FOR A MILE’S WALK & AN UNJUSTIFIED SOMETHING-FOR-NOTHING REQUEST – THE RESPONSE JESUS SUGGESTS IS ONE THAT WOULD HAVE TURNED THE ENTIRE SITUATION AROUND.

IT WOULD HAVE KEPT ONE’S INTEGRITY & DIGNITY INTACT WHILE DISPLAYING A VIRTUALLY INCOMPREHENSIBLE LEVEL OF DEFIANT LOVE IN ACTION.

WHAT JESUS WAS CALLING FOR WAS SOMETHING THE WORLD HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE!

THAT’S NOT THE WAY THE WORLD OPERATES!

BUT WHAT IF THIS NEW WAY – THIS THIRD WAY – WERE SOMEHOW TO CATCH ON?

**LET ME GIVE YOU AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT I'M
TALKING ABOUT.**

**SOME OF YOU MAY BE FAMILIAR WITH THE
GAME CALLED "ULTIMATE FRISBEE."**

**BASICALLY, IT'S FOOTBALL WITH A FRISBEE.
IT'S A REAL SPORT & OUR SON DAVID WAS
CAPTAIN OF HIS COLLEGE ULTIMATE TEAM.**

**THERE'S SOMETHING VERY INTERESTING
ABOUT ULTIMATE THAT MAKES IT QUITE
DIFFERENT FROM VIRTUALLY ANY OTHER TEAM
SPORT.**

**IT'S SELF-OFFICIATED.
EVEN IN TOURNAMENTS, THERE ARE NO
OFFICIALS.**

**THAT WOULD SEEM TO BE A RECIPE FOR
DISASTER.**

BUT HERE'S THE THING.

**IT WORKS BECAUSE EVERY PLAYER'S
INTEGRITY IS CHALLENGED BECAUSE PENALTIES
CAN ONLY BE CALLED BY THE ONE WHO
COMMITTED THE INFRACTION!**

THAT'S RIGHT.

**IF SOMEONE BREAKS THE RULES, THEY ARE
REQUIRED TO CALL IT UPON THEMSELVES!**

**IF THEY DON'T, PLAY GOES ON & THE
OPPONENT IS NOT ALLOWED TO CALL OUT THE
OFFENDING PLAYER.**

ASTOUNDINGLY, IT WORKS.

**I REMEMBER GOING TO AN ULTIMATE
TOURNAMENT ONE WEEKEND WITH ABOUT 8
COLLEGE TEAMS REPRESENTED.**

**IN THE FINAL GAME OF THE TOURNAMENT –
THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME BETWEEN THE TWO
TEAMS WHO HAD ELIMINATED THE OTHER SIX – IT
WAS NEARING THE END WITH ONE TEAM BEHIND,
BUT DRIVING FOR A SCORE THAT WOULD GIVE
THEM THE VICTORY.**

**ON THE LAST PLAY OF THE GAME, THERE WAS
ONE FINAL DESPERATION PASS.**

**A PLAYER DOVE & MADE AN INCREDIBLE CATCH
RIGHT AT THE GOAL LINE & HE TUMBLED INTO THE
END ZONE.**

THE CROWD WENT CRAZY.

**THE WINNING TEAM JUMPED AROUND IN
ECSTASY & THE LOSING TEAM STARTED TO WALK
OF THE FIELD IN DEJECTION.**

**BUT THEN THE PLAYER WHO MADE THAT
INCREDIBLE CATCH, JUMPED UP & SAID, “NO. I SAW
GRASS BETWEEN MY HAND & THE GOAL LINE WHEN I
WENT DOWN. THAT’S NOT A SCORE.”**

**THE GAME WAS STILL OVER – BUT THE OTHER
TEAM HAD WON.**

**THAT’S NOT THE WAY THE WORLD OPERATES, IS
IT?**

**BUT I’LL TELL YOU – I’VE SEEN A LOT OF
SPORTING EVENTS IN MY LIFE, BUT NONE MORE
UNFORGETTABLE THAN THAT ONE.**

**I MAY HAVE GREAT ADMIRATION FOR SOME
ATHLETES & THE SKILLS THEY POSSESS, BUT I’LL
NEVER HAVE MORE ADMIRATION THAN FOR THAT
YOUNG MAN.**

YOU SEE, HE CLEARLY BOUGHT INTO A THIRD WAY – A DIFFERENT WAY OF DOING THINGS - A COUNTER-CULTURAL WAY OF LIVING.

HE MAY HAVE LOST THE GAME, BUT HE EARNED THE RESPECT OF EVERY FAN, EVERY TEAMMATE & EVERY OTHER PLAYER ON EVERY OTHER TEAM AT THAT TOURNAMENT.

HE MAY HAVE LOST THE GAME, BUT HIS INTEGRITY & HIS DIGNITY WAS INTACT.

YOU SEE, THAT’S WHAT I THINK JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT HERE IN THIS PASSAGE.

HE’S TALKING ABOUT A NEW WAY OF LIVING & A NEW WAY OF LOVING.

THE MOST AMAZING THING ABOUT ALL OF THIS, THOUGH, IS THAT JESUS DIDN’T JUST TALK ABOUT IT.

**HE DIDN'T JUST SUGGEST THAT HIS FOLLOWERS
LIVE LIKE THIS.**

HE DID IT HIMSELF.

**THAT'S WHY THIS ISN'T JUST THE "HARD" OF
THE GOSPEL, BUT THE "HEART" OF THE GOSPEL AS
WELL.**

**IN ALL FOUR OF THE EXAMPLES JESUS GIVES,
HE CALLS FOR AN ACTIVE RESPONSE RATHER THAN
A PASSIVE ONE – TURN THE CHEEK, GIVE THE COAT,
WALK THE SECOND MILE, GIVE TO THOSE WHO
HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK.**

**AND BEFORE IT'S ALL OVER, JESUS WILL
DEMONSTRATE EACH & EVERY OF THOSE HIMSELF.**

**HE'LL BE SLAPPED ON THE CHEEK & NOT SLAP
BACK.**

**HIS COAT WILL BE TAKEN FROM HIM & ROMAN
SOLDIERS WILL STRIP HIM NAKED.**

**HE'LL BE FORCED TO WALK TO CALVARY
CARRYING HIS OWN CROSS.**

**HE'LL GIVE HIS OWN LIFE FOR THOSE WHO
HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK FOR IT.**

**JESUS DOESN'T JUST *TELL* US HOW TO LIVE.
HE *SHOWS* US HOW TO LIVE BY DOING IT
HIMSELF.**

**HIS INTEGRITY & HIS DIGNITY REMAINED
INTACT & HE LEFT THOSE WHO SOUGHT TO DEFEAT
HIM BEWILDERED AT THEIR INABILITY TO DO SO.**

**HE TOOK WHATEVER THEY HAD & IN HIS
WEAKNESS DISPLAYED MORE STRENGTH & LOVE &
POWER THAN THEY COULD POSSIBLY
COMPREHEND.**

I TOLD YOU MY SECOND FAVORITE MOVIE & PORTRAYAL OF JESUS IS THAT AQUALUNG-LIKE CHARACTER FROM THE BBC.

I SUPPOSE MY ALL-TIME FAVORITE ISN'T REALLY A MOVIE SPECIFICALLY ABOUT JESUS AT ALL & MY FAVORITE JESUS-LIKE CHARACTER IS EVEN STRANGER THAN THE AQUALUNG GUY!

IT'S "*COOL HAND LUKE*" WITH PAUL NEWMAN IN THE STARRING ROLE.

AMONG AT LEAST A DOZEN CHRISTOLOGICAL SCENES IN THE MOVIE IS ONE THAT CUTS DIRECTLY TO THE HEART OF THE MESSAGE OF THESE WORDS WE'VE READ THIS MORNING.

LUKE & HIS FELLOW PRISONERS ARE ON A CHAIN GANG ON A MISERABLY HOT SUMMER DAY.

THEIR TASK IS TO THROW SAND ON THE ROAD AS THEY FOLLOW A TAR TRUCK WITH ITS BOILING LIQUID BEING DROPPED DOWN & ITS HOT STEAM RISING UP JUST A FEW FEET IN FRONT OF THEM.

THE GUARDS ARE NEARLY GIDDY WITH EXCITEMENT AS THEY ANTICIPATE THE AGONY THE PRISONERS ARE ABOUT TO ENDURE.

THE PRISONERS ANTICIPATE THE DAY WITH ABSOLUTE DREAD.

BUT SHORTLY AFTER THEY BEGIN THE BACK-BREAKING WORK, LUKE STARTS TOSSING SAND WITH VIGOR.

HIS FELLOW PRISONERS TELL HIM TO SLOW DOWN & LUKE SAYS, *“THEY WANT SPEED – LET’S GIVE ‘EM SPEED.”*

HIS ATTITUDE QUICKLY CATCHES ON & THEIR SPIRIT OF RESIGNED DEFEAT IS TRANSFORMED INTO DEFIANT VICTORY

THEY'RE ALL IN IT TOGETHER – HOOPING & HOLLERING & HEAVING SAND & RUNNING UP THE ROAD WITH UNBRIDLED ENTHUSIASM.

THEY GET TO THE END OF THE ROAD HOURS BEFORE THEY SHOULD REASONABLY BE FINISHED & THE GUARDS LOOK AT THEIR WATCHES, THE SUN STILL HIGH IN THE SKY & THE PRISONERS NOT WILTED & WEARY BUT ANIMATED & AMIABLE.

LUKE'S FELLOW CHAIN GANG MEMBERS LOOK AT HIM IN ASTONISHMENT, KNOW HE'S JUST CHALLENGED THEM & ENABLED THEM TO DO SOMETHING THEY NEVER DREAMED POSSIBLE.

**THE GUARDS HAD SOUGHT TO BREAK THEM &
DEMORALIZE THEM.**

**WHAT HAPPENED WAS PRECISELY THE
OPPOSITE.**

**THOSE PRISONERS WERE ENERGIZED &
EMPOWERED.**

**YOU SEE, LUKE KNEW THERE WAS SOMETHING
MORE WITHIN THEM.**

**I THINK THAT’S THE POINT OF THE FINAL VERSE
OF THIS PASSAGE WHERE JESUS SAYS, “*YOU MUST BE
PERFECT AS YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN IS PERFECT.*”**

**THE WORD THAT IS USED HERE THAT WE
TRANSLATE “PERFECT” ISN’T WHAT WE
UNDERSTAND AS PERFECT.**

**WHAT IT REALLY MEANS IS – “*TO BE AS GOD
INTENDED YOU TO BE.*”**

**WE WERE MADE FOR SOMETHING MORE THAN
ANGER & REVENGE.**

**WE WERE MADE FOR SOMETHING MORE THAN
DEFEAT & DEJECTION.**

**WE WERE MADE TO LIVE AS CHRIST LIVED – TO
LOVE AS HE LOVED – TO GIVE AS HE GAVE - TO
SERVE AS HE SERVED.**

**THAT’S NOT AN EASY LESSON TO LEARN, BUT
IT’S ONE THAT’S ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL TO TRULY
BECOMING WHO GOD INTENDS US TO BE.**

**THAT’S WHY I THINK IT’S PRETTY REALISTIC TO
THINK OF JESUS SAYING, “*LISTEN TO ME, LISTEN TO
ME, I WANT YOU PEOPLE TO LISTEN TO ME!*”**

**IT’S “THE *HARD* OF THE GOSPEL” AND IT’S ALSO
“THE *HEART* OF THE GOSPEL.” AMEN.**

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