

**Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, February 19, 2017
The Rev. Tim Cole
Epiphany 7, Matthew 5:38-48**

Oscar Wilde is a great source of pithy and, at times, outrageous comments.

Coming from a family of teachers I like,

“Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.”

My sister and nephew were both journalists at one stage so I also like,

“The difference between literature and journalism is that journalism is unreadable while literature is simply not read.”

And for all pastors and counselors there is also,

“The only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on. It is never of any use to oneself.”

Finally - his last words,

Looking critically around the room in which he was dying he said, *“Either this wallpaper goes, or I do.”*

He also wrote the famous work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was first published in 1890 and caused quite a bit of outrage because it depicted a good deal of vice and debauchery.

At the heart of the book is the striking image of a man, Dorian Gray, who has a picture of himself in his attic as a fresh faced young man. Magically, the picture takes on all the effects of his debauched lifestyle while he remains unaffected by it. The picture represents his soul, and it grows uglier and uglier the more he sinks into vice, while the world continues to see the fresh faced young man, unaffected by all he does. In the end, Gray kills himself in attempting to destroy the picture and at last becomes the decrepit image it portrayed. The inner reality and the outward show are finally reunited and made one.

It is a grim tale, but it describes the universal theme of the contrast between outward appearance and inward reality in a dramatic way.

As Elizabeth explained last week, this whole section of Jesus’ teaching, called the Sermon of the Mount, including today’s Gospel, shows Jesus taking the external reality of the law and seeking to extend it to the internal reality of the heart. Our outward appearance and actions may, unlike Dorian Gray’s, be lawful and decent, but, as Jesus points out, we all know that what goes on in our hearts can be quite the opposite of what appears on our surface.

William Blake wrote a dark but truthful little poem that describes just this. It is called *The Poison Tree*. It is very short, so I will read it to you:

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine.
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole
When the night had veiled the pole;
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

If we are angry -- and are truthful with someone who hurts us - the situation can be resolved: "*I told my wrath, my wrath did end.*" If, however, we hide it, then Blake says it will fester and grow. Even when we are the innocent party, even when it is we that have been wronged, to hide the truth of our inner self leads to the evil coming to reside and grow in us.

So many times down the years I have found myself, as a priest, trying to help someone who has been betrayed, or hurt, or wronged in some way, but who has done nothing about it. The hurt stays with them and eats at them every day. The irony is often that the person that actually caused that hurt almost certainly has never given it or the injured party a second thought in all that time. Yet they, the innocent victim, is consumed by it.

Eric Lomax was a British Army Officer from my home town of Edinburgh. He was taken prisoner in Singapore during WW2 in 1942. He was condemned to work on the Burma Railway where he was tortured, beaten, and raped over an extended period. His autobiography, *The Railwayman*, shows how deeply damaged by his experiences he was and how they came to cripple his whole life. When he came back to Britain he could not marry the women he had asked to marry him before the war because he was not the same man. Yet, in later life, he meets with and is reconciled to one of his torturers, Takashi Nagase. It is hard to imagine how such a reconciliation could take place, but their meeting is recorded for all to see in the film documentary, "*Enemy, My Friend?*" The two old men meet and we can see that they both - perpetrator and victim - have great burdens that they have carried for many years that need to be laid down.

Eric Lomax was not a saint. He was just a damaged man who understood that he either carried the anger and hurt and poison in his soul to his grave or he had to find a way to put it down. His journey to meet his torturer was his step toward the good: his terrible commitment to going the long extra mile. Yet, by doing so, he was able, somehow, to begin to forgive. And therein lay his road to freedom.

How can anyone forgive something like that? And yet you begin to realize that forgiveness, or at least some kind of resolution, is not really for the perpetrator of the evil. In reality it is just as much for the victim. We need to find a way to purge the poison in our own soul and to set ourselves free from the heavy burden of the injustice that weighs us down. In the perspective of eternity, God will judge the injustice done to us. But in terms of living a full life now, it is only some approach toward forgiveness that can heal our own wounds and save our souls from bitterness and hatred and a greatly diminished life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But 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."*

Going the extra mile is to acknowledge the deeper law that goes beyond justice to something more. Like the stone table in C S Lewis's, *Chronicles of Narnia*, that is broken in two by *"the deeper magic from before the dawn of time."* The deeper law is released when the innocent Aslan dies for the guilty traitor, Eustace. The law of *"An eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth"* is broken in two by the deeper truth Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel. Eric Lomax had to reach out for that truth, the truth that lies in the heart of God. Somehow, he had to be like God, and come to regard the man who had wronged him as having some God-given value that went beyond the wrong he had done to him.

If we turn the other cheek, we are in no way bowing down and scraping to anyone. We are just showing that what drives us is bigger than what drives the evil action taken against us. Offering to go the extra mile sets us free and helps us to purge the poison of hurt from our own hearts. The bright and deadly apple on our tree is burned away. Dorian Gray's picture - his soul - begins to be restored and healed and made new.

Jesus said. *"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... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

None of this is to suggest for a moment that we should be cowed, or that we should be doormats to anybody. Christianity, sad to say, is sometimes portrayed as being weak and pathetic because of a misunderstanding of these beautiful words. The 19th century philosopher, Friedrich, described the faith as a *"Slave morality,"* and Karl Marx claimed that Christianity encouraged people to be subservient and quiescent in the face of oppression. In his view turning the other cheek is part of what makes the faith *"the opiate of the People,"* as he is famously quoted as saying.

But this is absolutely not true. If I choose to turn the other cheek, then that is my choice. No one, least of all the person who has just hit me, is making me do that. If I pray for my enemies and those who have wronged me, I am not praying for them because I have to or because I in any way approve their actions. Jesus accepted the imposition and suffering of the cross not as a slave who had no choice, but as a king who had laid aside his crown.

No, Jesus is not inviting us to be doormats. Especially not if evil is being threatened against those around us. It is one thing to turn your own cheek, but quite another to stand by and let your friends be hurt or killed. Jesus did not stand by while God's house was being abused and insulted, and I don't think he is asking us to let evil be done to others while we stand idly by. In fact, this is a call to us to try to see above and beyond: To see the child of God in the meanest adversary and in the ugliest betrayer. *"If they were your own child,"* Jesus is saying, *"how would you deal with their badness then? What would matter most to you, the hurt they have done, or the soul in them that they are damaging, like the picture in the attic?"*

Of course, we are never going to be perfect in any absolute sense: not in this life for sure. But Jesus is saying that we can imitate the perfection of God. In this one moment, in this one decision, we can for once be perfect even as our Heavenly Father is perfect. We can see the enemy, see those who frustrate, enrage, or hurt us, as God sees them: As his wayward but still most dear children. If my enemy were my boy or my girl, what would I say or do?