

“IS YOUR JESUS TOO SMALL?”
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48
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Do any of you remember a television show from the 1960s—I know, it’s going back a ways—called *Honey West*? Well, other than the fact that she was a sexy woman private investigator who could give better than she got from the bad guys, one of the things that distinguished Ms. West was that she had a pet ocelot. There was a fashion there for a few years for folks to take wild cats and keep them as domestic pets. We had a neighbor down the block who had, I think, a pet bobcat named “Kitty,” who wore a rhinestone-studded pink collar. She would take this animal on a leash on walks around the neighborhood, which was fine and sort of amusing until the day that Kitty managed to get out of the house unattended and ate another neighbor’s pet poodle. Great neighborhood drama!! But the point was that wild animals cannot really be successfully domesticated. Their true nature, what they are truly meant to be, will eventually come out and, likely as not, catch us off guard.

I feel much the same way about this morning’s gospel reading from Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It contains some of Jesus’ most difficult teaching: “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I tell you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you in the right cheek, offer the other also ; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give them 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. . .Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’ ”

Do you hear these words, really hear them? Do you hear how Jesus is calling us to live our lives? These are, none of them, unfamiliar words to us. “Turn the other cheek,” and “go the extra mile,” for example, have slipped into a comfortably commendable place, not only into Christian vocabulary, but the vocabulary of the entire culture. But I am quite sure that “comfortably commendable” is not what Jesus has in mind here. To draw an analogy from where I started, we are taking the wild nature of Jesus’ teaching and trying to turn it into something safely domesticated, something that will sit in our comfortable living rooms, that we can put on a leash and take walks with around the neighborhood. So let me give you some less comfortable images.

Jesus says, “Give to anyone who begs from you.” How many times have you walked down the street averting your eyes, wordlessly shaking your head when a panhandler asks if you can spare some change? How many times do we see the guys sitting at intersections with their hand-lettered signs, “No work. No food. Anything would help,” and we hold our breath for a moment, then turn our faces rigidly forward trying to make the sign, the man invisible?

“Do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” I don’t know if every family has one, but a lot of families I know have an aunt or a cousin or a nephew who is always out of a job, and always earnestly vowing to turn his/her life around or take advantage of some great opportunity. He/she only needs to borrow \$500 or \$1,000 or more, and now it’s common knowledge that any money you give will go up her

nose or down to the track with him or otherwise evaporate and never be paid back, and you feel sorry for this person, but. . . “Do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

Do not resist evildoers. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, offer the other also.” I remember one of the most striking scenes from the movie *Gandhi*. It was the great Salt March of 1930, protesting the British salt tax. Even the poorest of Indians were prohibited from picking up the salt that lay naturally on the ground in coastal areas, instead having to pay exorbitant prices for salt from the British monopoly. One day, hundreds of protesters walked down to the coast, four abreast. The enforcement officials were waiting. One row of men would reach down, pick up a handful of salt. They would be clubbed in the head, often resulting in instant death. The next line stepped up, picked up salt, were clubbed, fell; the next line came on, and on, and on, unconscious and lifeless bodies piling up until even the most bloodthirsty could not stomach any more. “Do not resist evildoers. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies.” But we haven’t gotten to the hardest part yet. “Be perfect, therefore,” Jesus said, “even as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Being perfect in Jesus’ vocabulary means coming to live in community where the boundaries between yours and mine cease to have meaning. Be perfect—and with only self-sacrificing love to protect you, go out and address the evil of the world. No rhinestone collars. No leashes. No comfortably commendable acts with which to wrap ourselves in virtue. Just a wild vision of what the world might be if we were different, if we were perfect.

Are you wanting to flee the building right about now, just slink quietly, invisibly away looking for a place where you’ll find a sweet gentle Jesus suitable for happy face stickers who lives comfortably in your heart? I will tell you this: if you find a Jesus who lives comfortably in your heart, then your Jesus is too small, too domesticated. The Jesus of the gospels, he who touched lepers, and ate with the outcasts; he who taught whoever would listen, and drove the money-changers out of the temple; the Jesus who turned his face towards Jerusalem and willingly, willingly died for the world he so loved: maybe for a handful of saints throughout the centuries, he lived comfortably within them. But for the rest of us, if we wish to be disciples, if we return Jesus’ love for us, then we will find a way to live uncomfortably as he takes up residence in our hearts and then goes about the work of rearranging them, rebuilding them, making them larger, more open, more scarred and more whole at the same time.

The greatest threat to discipleship is complacency, the smugness that sees the sin of the rest of the world and then sees ourselves as different, as apart from, as better—maybe not perfect yet but certainly better—than-average, acceptable. Our greatest hope for growing into the people Jesus wants us to be, the people Jesus believes we can be, is to acknowledge that we are not even close to perfect: that we are not separate, not above; we are as much in need of Christ’s love and grace as any of our neighbors. And the good news of the Gospel for us today is that this large and un-domesticated Jesus who asks so much of us and who we struggle to understand and follow, that Jesus is large enough to extend his love and grace to us even when we take the easy way, even when we pretend our neighbors are invisible, even when we try to reduce his teaching to a smallness that is within our reach.

Over the last few days as I have been living with this text and writing and rewriting, an old gospel hymn has kept playing in my brain and in my heart. It’s the one that goes, “It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing

in the need of prayer, just me, just me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my brother, not my sister, not the preacher, not the deacon, not my mother, not my father, not my neighbor, not the stranger. Just me, O God, standing in the need of prayer.” If we would follow the large, wild Jesus who calls us not just into a world that’s a little better off, but instead into a new heaven and a new earth, then let us remember that prayer and make room for the real, large, wild, discomfoting Jesus to take up residence within our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.