

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

**GIVING AND FORGIVING**  
*Sermon for Epiphany 7A-Mt 5:39-48*  
LPC, 1/23/14

Have you ever been really mean to someone and received kindness in return? Have you ever had someone you considered an enemy do something that actually benefitted you? I have heard some stories about how civilians in war have come to the aid of enemy soldiers. Sometimes soldiers on opposing sides are unexpectedly very kind to each other. Sometimes, very rarely, victims of crimes become benefactors of the people who have wronged them. I heard, for example, that the family of Martin Luther King, Jr., became advocates for James Earl Ray, King's assassin. Or remember the Amish families who reached out in love to the murderer of their children. Sometimes people are giving and forgiving beyond all imagining.

This is not the way human beings usually work. People usually respond to cruelty, or violence, or wrongdoing in kind. But not always

I can remember as a little girl getting really angry at my father for something and pounding his chest with my tiny fists. And, of course, he did not respond in kind, but tried to hold me and assure me of his love, giving and forgiving.

Has anyone ever given you way more than you asked for? Or been generous with you without your even having to ask? Once again, the personal example I can think of has to do with a parent. When Rich and I were facing unemployment and having trouble making ends meet, my mother-in-law paid off our mortgage. Just like that. No strings attached. There was no dissuading her. She just couldn't bear the thought of our suffering, when she had the means to help, giving and forgiving.

If you are a parent, perhaps you can identify. I know I would do anything in my power to help my kids. This is what parents do. But what about people outside the family? What about strangers? What about people who have hurt you?

I have wracked my brain to think of personal experience of people outside my family repaying kindness for my meanness, or of strangers offering generosity, with no strings attached. Once, when I was driving on slick, rainy, curvy country roads, I lost control of my car and hydroplaned. I did a 180, ending up in the ditch on the other side of the road with a flat tire. Two gentlemen in a pickup, whom under other circumstances I might have called rednecks (in other words, not my type of people), stopped and changed my tire, knee deep in mud. Of course they wanted no payment. "It's what anyone would do," they said, giving and forgiving. But of course, not everyone would have done what they did.

This is how God is, though. Giving and forgiving. We can do dirt to God up, down and sideways, and God will not resist. God will be like my father, gently withstanding our puny punches.

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God will give more than we ask, or give without our asking, as my mother-in-law did in paying off our mortgage. God will change our tires, figuratively speaking, without accepting payment. Giving and forgiving.

We hear Jesus' teaching, like today's from the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is saying not to repay meanness for meanness, not to keep score of wrongs done to us, to be more generous than required, to give to everyone who begs, without reasoning that they're just going to use it on drugs or drink, to *love our enemies*. We don't do this. This is not how people act in our world. Even if we wanted to, which mostly we don't, we have precious few models for this giving and forgiving type of behavior.

In a perfect world, people could heed this teaching. But this world is far from perfect. Try turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, lending to everyone who asks, and you will soon be ruined. People will take advantage of you. They will take, and take and take, and there will be nothing left.

Yet this is what we are commanded. We are told to be giving and forgiving. We are told to be perfect.

We are not perfect. We can only assume that our imperfection, our inability to follow these admonitions, aggrieves God.

And yet, God does not fight back. God is giving and forgiving. God turns the other cheek. God goes the extra mile. God gives more than asked. God continues to give even when we are ungrateful: even when we take for granted everything we have received. God is the parent who will do anything in God's power to help us. And God's power is immense.

There is no way we can obey Christ's teaching from the standpoint of imperfect humans, always falling short. The only way we can even hear this teaching is from the standpoint of grateful recipients of wrongs forgiven, or a cloak timely offered, or the companionship of a second mile, or a loan without strings.

We have received all this and more from our loving and generous Parent. Our question to God is not, "what do we have to do now?" but "how can I possibly ever thank you?"

Today we baptize a baby, Adeline Leigh Duymich. We vow to uphold this person in her life in Christ. Perhaps we can provide her with models of giving and forgiving people who know how many blessings we have received. Perhaps we can provide her with models of people who, in gratitude for extra miles granted to us, walk extra miles for others. Whether we succeed or fail, our God will be with us, and be with Adeline, giving and forgiving, giving and forgiving, for ever.