

“SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PROVES JESUS TO BE RIGHT!!”

February 19, 2017 (Epiphany 7)

Matthew 5: 38-48

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This morning, I have a headline for you. It reads:

“Scientific Research Proves Jesus to Be Right!”

So what do I mean? This morning, we hear a continuing part of the Sermon on the Mount. In this section, 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 one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.’” Now in the first section of this quote, Jesus is referring to something known as the *lex talionis* or the law of retribution. It is the oldest law known to humanity and is found first in the Hammurabi Code, which is dated more than 2,000 years before the birth of Christ. The *lex talionis* (it is believed) was first proclaimed to put an end to blood feuds because, before the “eye for an eye” standard was set, if one member of a family was injured by an attack, the rest of his kin would go out and wreak vengeance on the attacker and any other member of his clan they could lay hands on. And so this earliest law effectively put an end to that escalating violence by saying “if you have been injured, then your attacker should be similarly injured—and that puts an end to it.” The law was logical and (for the most part) effective.

But in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers another way of being. “I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” he said. It is not logical. Neither do I think it is posed as an effective preventive against further injury. Rather his philosophy is something that Jesus offers us as a fulfillment of the law. Remember earlier in this chapter of Matthew, Jesus has said, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law...I have come to fulfill them.” And so Jesus here proposes his fulfillment of the law’s policy: “Don’t seek retribution,” he tells us. “Seek rather a change in your own heart.”

Not long ago, I was reading a Richard Rohr meditation online. In it, the author alluded to the fact that science has begun to make some associations between the functioning of our brains in conjunction with our hearts. So I looked it up and, according to a site called HeartMath Institute, where we have thought that primarily the brain sends signals to the heart, research now shows that the heart not only sends signals to the brain but that it sends more signals to the brain than the brain to the heart, and that those signals affect emotional processing, attention, perception, memory, and problem-solving skills.

For instance, at Vanderbilt University, studies done on children who have received heart surgery before the age of 5 seem to bear this out. These studies point to the fact that early heart surgery and its ensuing recuperation increase the chances of ADD and cognitive deficit into the teen year of the patients who received the early surgery. Science may be finding that the state of our hearts affects our state of mind! (Welcome science!)

Now, our hearts can be positively affected by two things: relaxation (we might, for instance do breathing exercises, which will slow heart rate and even out the peaks and valleys of its activity) and positive appreciation, compassion, and love. When these emotions are practiced—and encouraged—our heart rate also slows (although the peaks and valleys of its activity do not even out). Nonetheless, this slowed heart rate alone leads us to calm, balance, energy, responsiveness, and clear thinking.

So when Jesus suggested that we love our enemies rather than seeking retribution, he was proposing that we move the precepts of the law from the logical brain position in our bodies down into the heart area. If we can learn to love our enemies (or strangers) we will be happier—and smarter too!

I tried to come up with an experience where this has happened in my own life and I could think of just one, so if you have heard it, please forgive me. In 1999, I was the curate at Grace Church in Newark. My job was to work with the choir boys there, all of whom came from poor homes and one of whom lived in the high-rise projects. Well, as their spiritual leader and social support at the church, it was up to me to develop a rapport with their moms or guardians. So I arranged to make home visits. In one instance, I called Omar’s mom, who said she would welcome a visit. However, when I arrived in the parking lot, I should call her and she would come and fetch me. I said I’d be happy to get myself up there but she was determined, so I accepted her offer.

Now, once I got to the lot and she led me inside the building, I understood her reasoning. The hallways were dark and dirty and felt airless. She had her five-year-old daughter with her, who was a picture in coordinated dress: she had on jeans and a pink top, with her hair fixed up in little pink bands, and on her feet she wore sneakers with curly pink and silver laces. The child was like a breath of spring air in the halls of that building!

We walked to the elevator. Mrs. Smith pushed the button and we got in. The elevator walls were covered in graffiti. A dim, uncovered bulb lit the interior and the plywood under-flooring was an uneven and stained wooden landscape of valleys and plateaus. The entire floor of the elevator was covered in urine, which puddled in the valleys of the flooring. As we got in, each of us moved to the edges of the elevator where the floor was highest but as I looked down, I noticed that little Tanisha's shoe laces—the perfect pink and silver laces—were resting in a puddle of pee. Then the door opened and we got out and went into the oasis of their apartment.

So why do I tell you this? Because in that moment when I saw those laces in the puddle, something in me moved. I cannot really describe it but after that, I became serious about proportionate giving and soon moved to the tithe. My heart led my head to the place Hebrew Scripture mandates as what we owe back to God. My heart led my head to the law. So this morning, I tell you: I have a headline:

“Scientific Research Proves Jesus to Be Right!”

The law is logical but humanity does not live by logic alone.

Pay attention to your heart. Love strangers. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

It is good for them. It is good for you.

And it will make us all smarter!

Amen.