

Matthew 5: 43-48 (ESV – in bulletin)

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers,^a what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In CEB it reads: ⁴⁸ Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Today, let me ask you: Do you want to hear a finger-pointing, **“You’d better ...”** sermon? Or do you want to hear a **“This is what it is”** sermon?

(The following is option #2 – assuming that was the choice.)

Last week, I said in the sermon that I had told my best friend visiting us from Virginia that **my hardest job** as a preacher was to **convince people of the underlying principle of this whole sermon series**, the central message of Jesus’ whole life and teaching, namely: **Turn around, the Kingdom of Heaven IS AT HAND.**

And, while that is true, then perhaps **today’s message is the most radical message and the one most resisted by folks in and out of the Church today.**

But ... **it is what it is.** (Or, as we at Saint Marks are wont to say: **I|W|I|.**)

In order to make Jesus’ message of two millennia ago more timely, I’ll use two people whose lives are 100 years old:

How many of you know of **Charles Walker** and **Violet Constance Jessop**?

Charles Walker’s story has been told (as I found it) in the Charleston Gazette, the New York Times, the Sandusky Star Journal, the Manchester News, and the newspaper of Ft. Wayne, Indiana in 1921. Pretty famous person, eh? I ran across his name in a monument a couple of blocks from here in Charleston. Charles Walker was the only person killed on January 3, 1921, in the fire that consumed our previous state capital building. As best as I can determine, from melding the various news accounts, he was a volunteer fireman from Huntington, who was a state employee working in the capital, and was working alongside the paid Charleston Fire Department officers to throw important

government documents out a window of the capital (to save them) when a wall (or chimney) fell down on him.

I ask you – how do you judge his life? Was he (not just in that final moment) overall a good man or not?

Second example – [Violet Constance Jessop](#). World famous. She was born a Irishwoman in Argentina, but emigrated to England. There she served on the largest (when it was built) steamboat in the world, the [Olympic](#), when it collided with the British warship *HMS Hawke* and nearly sank, in **1911**. Thereafter she sailed as a stewardess on the [Titanic](#) (the newest largest luxury liner) on her maiden and final voyage in **1912**, surviving its sinking after striking an iceberg. After that she served as a stewardess on the *sister ship of the Titanic*, the [Britannic](#), the ocean liner now converted into a hospital ship, when it was sunk in 57 minutes, after an unexplained explosion, in the Aegean Sea. She also survived this catastrophe in **1916**. She lived to the age of 83, dying in 1971.

[So how do you judge her long life – good or bad?](#)

Was Walker a bad person – having died as the only fatality on January 3, 1921, when the whole capital building was destroyed? And was Jessop a good woman, having not died in three maritime disasters?

Perhaps these questions beg the question, **“Why do bad things happen to good people?”** Or **“Why do bad people survive instead of good people?”**

It is the former question that today’s scripture answers, but I suspect that it also informs how we deal with the latter tough issue.

My January ReMarker (Newsletter) senior pastor’s column was all about the theological issue, **WE OUGHT NOT JUDGE**, based upon today’s scripture: **For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.**

I noted in that article how much of our time we spend judging, from the moment we awaken until the moment we close our eyes for sleep. We hardly ever simply OBSERVE something (I said) without JUDGING WHETHER IT IS GOOD OR BAD.

When my friend from Virginia visited last week, he asked me about that newsletter article, particularly the last paragraph, in which I invited anyone who would like to learn

more about how we go about developing such non-dualistic / non-binary / non-judgmental thinking. I invited people to contact me if they would like to learn about this. He said, “**How many people contacted you?**” I said, “**Just one.**”

Do you have a glimmer of an idea why I think today’s message is the most radical message and the one most resisted by folks in and out of the Church today?

It goes all the way back to “the Garden” to a [story about Eve and a serpent and Adam and a tree](#), in **Genesis, chapter 3**. What was that ONE TREE from which Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat? It is described back in chapter two:

Genesis 2:16 The LORD God commanded the human, “Eat your fill from all of the garden’s trees; ¹⁷ but don’t eat from the [tree of the knowledge of good and evil](#), because on the day you eat from it, you will die!”

God commanded humans from the beginning of the book **not to judge**. Jesus said over and over and over, these words: “**Judge not**” (24 times!!)

Why?

So we can be – as today’s scripture says – like God, who **makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.**

- How many of you believe this to be true?
- How many of you believe this is what God wants us to do?
- How many of you believe that Jesus meant what He said here?
- Don’t raise your hands, please.

I’m not sure why we do this so much, even though the Biblical mandate is so strong.

- Are we stuck because of what Adam and Eve did?
- **Maybe, although God gave us so many other things to do, and this is the one thing that God absolutely prohibits, that we still somehow think we ought to give God a helping hand.**
- I think that sometimes we do it because we like the power of being a judge.
- **I think that sometimes we do it because we just have seen it done so much, we can’t imagine acting any differently.**
- I think we do it because we just can’t imagine not doing it.

- I think sometimes we do it so that we can COMPARE ourselves to others ... “well, I may be a sinner, but at least I’m not as bad as so-and-so.”

And then sometimes – sometimes a little tweak of scripture can open my eyes.

You heard Janet read today the popular version of this scripture. In particular, the last verse read today. Let me repeat what you heard and then read a different translation:

⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In the CEB translation, it reads: ⁴⁸ **Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.**

Actually, from my study of the original words (I rely upon the experts I read in seminary,) the word “complete” is probably a more accurate translation. It certainly helped me to understand this scripture better.

Let me explain. To begin with, I quote the anonymous sage who said: **It takes a lifetime to prepare a soul for eternity.**

As we grow older, our bodies may fail, but we gain wisdom and begin to see life better (*unless we are spiritually stunted, which some people are by virtue of their occupation – like politicians*).

- **As we grow older, our wisdom becomes more complete.**
- **And when our wisdom becomes more complete, we better understand what Jesus said.**

Here’s the part of the sermon that I promised at the beginning – telling it not as finger pointing and finger wagging, but simply **it is what it is**. (Or, as we at Saint Marks are wont to say: **IWWI**.)

It’s why we have young people go fight wars. We can convince them that something is worth dying (or better yet) killing for. The strange thing is that those things for which people are willing to die, or kill, for – these things seems so very clear in the moment. Years later, we look back through history and say: **Really?**

- **You are willing to kill thousands of people over the love of one woman?**

- **Really? You are willing to kill thousands of people over the idea that one human can own another human and exploit them for economic gain (slavery)?**
- Really? If the second half of a pretty insignificant southeastern Asian country becomes communist then the whole of America will also fall? By the way – 50 years later and “not happened!” Even the Secretary of Defense who crafted the whole military policy that send tens of thousands of people to their deaths later confessed that the whole thing was wrong.
- **Really?**

But young people are more willing to buy into that and go do it. **Old people, with the wisdom of their years (except – as I noted before – those occupationally stunted in their wisdom growth – politicians)** tend to think those wars aren’t such a good idea.

As I look at the people in my life, I notice that older people have a lot less trouble accepting Jesus’ teaching here, than their juniors.

Older people are a whole lot more willing to live and let live – and let God will sort it out. I don’t need to stand up and judge others.

Perhaps, as I hear Jesus telling us what God intends, I get the notion that **Jesus was just prematurely old**. He “got it,” well before his 30-some years.

So – instead of merely pointing my finger and offering the admonition: “**Repent of your judgmentalism!**” – I can simply say (as the later sermon sub-title says – and echoing Paul McCartney’s voice singing) **It’s a long and winding road that leads us home.**

It takes a lifetime to prepare a soul for eternity. I pray that we may – **THROUGH PRAYER** – actually become prematurely wise and learn the lesson that Adam and Eve had so much trouble accepting.

Judge this sermon however you want.

Or – **HERE’S AN IDEA** – **don’t judge it at all.** Just let it percolate.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.