

THE DISCIPLINES OF NEIGHBORLINESS

A Sermon on Matthew 5:38-48—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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Red, yellow and blue paint; or red, green, and blue light: primary colors. They can be splendid by themselves or combine to show off a full palette of colorful possibilities.

At ballet practice, dancers review the five basic positions, because ballet choreography generally consists of some combination of those positions.

And snare drumming may seem complicated [plays snare drum here for a moment] but it breaks down to basic elements or rudiments of stick alternation, rolls, flams, and the elementary disciplines that get practiced over and over again.

Like primary colors,
the five basic ballet positions,
or the rudiments of drumming,
Christian discipleship also consists of basic ways of being and doing, disciplines, that when combined help make the expression beautiful.

At the end of today's reading Jesus says to his disciples, which we overhear through Matthew, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Now, the Greek word usually translated here as perfect can also mean complete. But it also really does mean perfect. So, if the adage, practice makes perfect, or as my high school band director said, "Perfect practice makes perfect," then it makes even more sense to listen to Jesus' words, break down his prescriptions into some basic rudiments, and practice them so that we can move

toward Jesus' goal of perfection in discipleship.

By my reading of the sermon after the Beatitudes and salt and light references, Jesus lifts up four disciplines for his disciples: God-trust, self-reflection, humility and mercy.

Discipline #1: Trusting in God. Jesus tells his disciples to store up for themselves treasure in heaven, where rust and moth don't destroy. Trust in God's treasures. Jesus says don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or wear. God clothes the grass of the field and will take care of you. Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. Trust in God's providence, trust that God will provide. And even the end of the sermon, where Jesus says those who hear these words and acts on them are like a man who built his house on rock, he declared that when the rains and winds come, but the house will not fall. Trust in God's word, Jesus says. Trust in God.

To practice trust in God means to let go of our desire to control everything around us, letting go of trying to regulate every move our kids make or what exactly the next twenty years or twenty minutes must bring. Trusting in God means practicing a life that is not constantly on demand.

We practice trust in God whenever we pray. Prayer entrusts our lives with God. Thankfully, Jesus gives us a prayer in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, which he says should be the kind of prayer we

pray, like a rehearsal prayer, not so that it's some form of magical incantation but so that we have learned from the discipline of praying it and can therefore pray to God in the ways we need to when we need to trust in God.

To practice trust means to have faith in God's love for all creation, ourselves included.

Discipline #2: Self-Reflection.

Jesus says to pay attention not just to what you do but also to your being, what you're feeling and thinking. You're liable to judgment, Jesus says, not just if you kill somebody, but also if you get angry with your sibling.

Jesus commands us to be self-reflective, to examine the motives in our hearts, to always pay attention to why we do things and how we are feeling. Self-reflection is the discipline that helps us follow through on Jesus' command to judge not, lest we be judged. When we examine our own hearts, we know that if and when we get judged, we will be found wanting just as much as most everybody else.

This brings us to the closely-related rudiment #3: Humility. When we know ourselves well enough to see the weakness and sin inside us, we can practice more easily the discipline of humility, to value ourselves no more (and I'd say no less) than anybody else or anything else in all creation. Jesus teaches the value of humility when he criticizes the priests and Pharisees for saying long prayers in public to look smart. Jesus commands his followers to not care about looking good in order to boost one's own status. He calls us to be humble, to keep our egos in check because being self-

aware we can know that if we don't keep our egos in check they will get in the way of doing what God wills us to do.

Prayer leads us to practice these disciplines, too. By praying we not only discern God's will but also reflect on what we want and need, and can take the opportunity to let reform our will in God's image. Through prayer we can grow in humility where we seek justice, where we see God's love being spread evenly among all people. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we pray just for enough to make it through each day, not some gluttonous amount, we pray that we all receive our daily bread, not more for some and less for others. And when we pray for God to lead us not into temptation but to deliver us from evil, we pray both with the self-awareness and the humility to know that we are likely no better or worse than others at fighting temptation.

Trust in God; humility; self-awareness.

And finally, there's rudiment or discipline #4: Mercy, a.k.a. unconditional love. Mercy is that absolute love and care for all creation, including other people, no matter what has been or is being done to us. This is what today's reading primarily focuses us on. Do not resist an evil-doer, Jesus says. If anyone takes your coat, give them your cloak as well. Give to everyone who begs from you. Turn the other cheek.

These actions require merciful discipline, loving each person infinitely, in the face of their perhaps cruel or at least seemingly unfair actions, still recognizing another's divine worth and dignity, which empowers you not to strike back and enables you to live

on God's terms of peace instead of on someone else's games of hatred. If we call turning the other cheek weakness, we overlook the resistance it takes to not take the low road, to not let instinct kick in. Jesus is not talking about letting yourself be battered by a violent partner—please remove yourself from such situations as far as you safely can at least for a while. Jesus is saying instead to resist any power lorded over you by resisting by God's help the temptation to let it turn you violent too.

Now if these were just words of Jesus then we could consider it a nice pep talk from a dynamic sermonizer, caught up in the Spirit but not really meaning what he says. But Jesus fulfills the Sermon on the Mount—he yearns for God and God's will and is self-reflective when he says, Take this cup from me, O God, but not my will but your will be done. I may want to survive but I trust you. Jesus is humble, not trying to use his power to just save himself but to let his death and resurrection be the occasion for salvation of all people. And Jesus is merciful on the cross, forgiving those who crucify him, blessing those who persecute him. The good news is that these rudiments are truly disciplines for disciples, practices for people who don't just follow Jesus words but who follow Jesus' own actions.

These four straightforward yet so difficult disciplines are what the Rev. James Lawson taught his students when in the early 1960s he was asked by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King to train young people, of black and other skin tones, how to prepare for sit-ins. Rev. Lawson used the Sermon on the Mount, as he saw Ghandi use its inspiration to guide his

nonviolent resistance in India, to guide his training. And especially today's eleven verses.

When you are an African American sitting at a whites only lunch counter, you will need to have practiced trust in God because you will be asking yourself by in the world have you put yourself in danger? To further God's will, trusting in God in that moment. You will need to be self-reflective. When a white man comes up to you and blows smoke in your face, you will need to be aware of your instinctual reflexes and determine what other choices you have. You will need to be humble, to not see yourself as better or worse than anybody else in that diner, but simply a child of God equally deserving a place at the table. And God knows you will need mercy to forgive those who do not recognize your humanity, to turn the other cheek and to transcend their violence with love and peace. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. James Lawson knew from the Sermon on the Mount and today's reading in particular that it takes more than just a flighty notion of love to face down oppression, it takes discipline, too, discipline to stay true to God's love when it matters most. Rev. Lawson's training took to enough of the young people that the sit-ins exposed the brutality of segregation.

That's just one extremely intense example of the power of Christian discipline from sixty years ago. As long as forces still conspire against the conditions for God's love to flourish, there is still need for Christian discipline today and tomorrow. UCC theologian Walter Brueggemann points out that throughout the Bible, different empires—Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Greece and

Rome—threaten the ability of people to live in neighborhoods, those places of mercy and humility, self-reflection and trust. Over the two thousand years after Jesus' ministry, Empire has resurfaced in colonialism, white supremacy and more recent and subtle forms of oppression. But today Brueggemann sees empire most clearly in a "therapeutic, technological, consumer militarism" that threatens to turn our communities into distrustful individuals who choose to isolate themselves from one another and try to seek wholeness from their stuff.

You know from experience how often those forces work against human community and neighborhood, how the overdependence on our stuff isolates us in the fortresses of our homes, our cars, all these borders. The disciplines that Jesus lifts up—reflection and God trust, humility and mercy—those are the ways that we resist the influence of Empire today. Self-reflection: Why are we so isolated? Well, I get sucked into my tablet because I can control it more than a person, it gives me what I want when I want it...kind of. But is it better for my flourishing and the flourishing of my family and community? Humility: Do we deserve the safety of our homes, the bounty of our land, and the protection of our military more than anybody else? Mercy: How can we unconditionally embrace the people around us as our first neighbors but not our only neighbors? God trust: What does God really want us to do in love today? How can I trust Jesus by following him today?

What's at stake for us today is whether we choose by the practice of our Christian disciplines of neighborliness to strengthen our

faith and our community as God's people or whether we let other powers dictate lives of isolation and utter distrust.

Each discipline, like a rudiment, can be isolated: mercy, self-reflection, humility, and trust in God. But when we practice them day in and day out and put them together in our own lives, or better yet, in a faith community of support and accountability, we learn how to fulfill our purpose as instruments of God's peace, how to amplify God's love and declare that another world is possible through God in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.