

## TOUGH LOVE

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 19 February 2017

Matthew 5:38-48

[MW17-01]

I was searching on Google, as you do, for a cartoon to go with my Wayne's Word

- and I came across a picture of Jesus sitting on a rock, on the mountainside surrounded by a crowd of people
- Jesus says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"
- a person objects saying:  
"But what if they're gang members, P-Lab operators or money launderers?"
- and Jesus responds:  
"Alright, I'll start again from the top. Let me know where I lost you."

What Jesus says is not logical, is it?

- it didn't make sense when he said it on the mount way back then it doesn't seem to make any sense now
- "Love your enemies and pray for those who make your life difficult" how's that going to do any good???

But then I got to thinking, and I invite you to follow this thought with me

- what about that Roman soldier? He asks a Jewish bloke to carry his pack and instead of the usual grudging one mile, he cheerfully goes two, or more
- this soldier gets back to barracks and says to his mates:  
"Man did I find a live one today. Instead of going one mile, this sucker carries my pack two miles, and talking all the way like I was his friend or something!"
- as the soldier tells and retells this story, they all begin to wonder why did that Jewish guy do that, what is going on?
- there is even a popular saying isn't there: "going the extra mile" people notice and talk and wonder the best kind of 'advertising' as the story is told and told and told and told ...

Along the same lines is another saying I came across:

- "Forgive your enemies. It messes with their heads."  
Jesus says not to get even, don't look for revenge  
but I don't think he means for us to just wimp out or get taken advantage of to just roll over and play dead
- Jesus is on about actively doing something by "going the extra mile" kind of like getting back at people who hurt us or mistreat us by doing something positive
- someone takes your shirt? willingly give them your jacket!

Now I had a friend from an Asian country who assured me this "turning the other cheek"

- just would not work in his culture  
non-violent response, not protecting yourself  
would result in laughter and great pleasure taken in thumping that other cheek too
- however it seems to me what Jesus is calling us to do  
is to not react as expected, not react as custom or culture condition us to  
and certainly not to react with hatred or violence
- nor is there an option to just 'ignore' what happens

Jesus calls for a positive response, doing something which blesses the very person

- who is trying to hurt us, or who has hurt us, in some way  
and we may need to put some effort into working out just what  
"going the extra mile" is in the situation today

“Love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you”  
- imagine what a difference that will make  
it is mind-blowing ... certainly messing with my head  
- how would that work in ordinary every day life???

So I did what I often do in such situations, I gave it to a “real bloke” to work out ...

A while back I felt I was being challenged to go beyond the theories and technical terms and high-sounding ideals of being a Christian. It was as if I was being told to ‘get real with God’. To ‘cut to the chase’; get down to earth, back to basics. Out of this, over a period of time, a series of stories has developed. Stories which are most definitely not ‘straight theology’ or Biblical scholarship – though I’m pretty sure that’s all in there! Rather they are about a ‘real bloke’ who has the experience of God bursting into his life. This bloke is probably not a regular church-goer, but he and the Lord have some interesting conversations – and develop quite a relationship. Stories which deal with real situations, like this, which I’ve called: “A Shovelful of Trouble”

I’m not really into gardening, so it’s a good job my wife Patti enjoys it. And I kind of help – but I don’t pull anything out unless she tells me to! Sometimes to it’s fine when we’re all out there together Patti, the boys and me. However I do enjoy mowing the lawns. I find something relaxing, even the therapeutic about it – and it gives me a chance to think.

But what I definitely do not enjoy is having to waste time going around my lawn with a shovel. You know, picking up all the “doggy do” before I can get down to the serious business of mowing. I know whose dog it is too. Neighbour over the back fence. Lets it roam the streets and boy does it sure seem to enjoy roaming to our place. Sometimes the darn thing howls too – I can almost put up with that. It’s the “deposits” and really make me angry.

Of course I’ve rung him, the neighbour. First couple of times he said “sorry” and was very apologetic. Now he just hangs up as soon as he recognises it’s me. Some neighbour he is. Still I’ve figured out my own solution...

...I was walking up to the back fence with a shovel full of “you know what”, to throw it over where it belonged. There was a “huh hmmmh!” behind me.

I turned around. Carefully. I didn’t want to spill anything. It was the Lord – I might have known. “What do you think you’re doing?” he said in that tone that sends chills down your spine.

“I’m going to put this over the fence where it belongs.”

“Is that really such a good idea?”

Sometimes the Lord could be worse than your parents. A real spoil sport! “I think it’s a jolly great idea,” I said. “I’m tired of having to pick this stuff up off the lawn and before I can mow it. I’m sick and tired of having to check the yard before Brandon and Paul can go out to play. And I’ve had enough of that darn thing scratching around Patti’s garden that she puts so much time into!” I was exasperated.

“And this’ll fix it?” said the Lord.

I was exasperated some more. “I don’t know. Maybe not but at least I’ll feel better.”

“You know it says in the Bible about forgiving people.”

“Yeah I know. I’ve done that. It didn’t help. Now I’m on to this.”

“Do you know how many times you’re advised to forgive someone?”

I don’t know,” I said. “You know I’m not well up on this stuff. Three maybe? That’s a popular biblical number.”

"Uh uh. Seventy times seven."

"Seventy times seven!" I said. "That's, that's four hundred and ninety! I'm way past four hundred and eighty nine with this guy. I tell you this shovelful's going over."

"Wait a minute," said the Lord. "What do you think I do when I get past four hundred and ninety?"

"Maybe you keep on forgiving. But then I guess you have to cos you're God and that's your business."

"All forgiveness is my business. You're my business."

"Great," I said, "then fix this thing with my neighbour and his dog."

"I am," said the Lord.

"That's more like it. So what are you doing on this side of the fence!"

"Fixing things. Now why don't you put down that shovel and its contents."

I went and dumped it in the hole I'd dug in the back lawn. "Guess I'm not gonna get to do this today," I grumbled.

"No. And you'll be better for it," said the Lord. "I know you don't think so, but the feeling doesn't last - believe me. I've done the flood and the Sodom and Gommorah thing. Doesn't work in the long run. Besides, it's not a good way to teach your boys to deal with problems is it?"

"So I suppose you have a better idea. Maybe something more practical and helpful than forgiving seventy times seven." I couldn't help a little sarcasm sneaking into my tone, which is not exactly a good idea when talking to the Lord all powerful - especially so soon after he mentioned the flood and Sodom and Gommorah! To his credit though, he overlooked it - guess he really stuck to that forgiveness thing.

"As a matter of fact I do have a suggestion for you," he said.

"All right then, I'm ready," I said. ("But none too willing," I thought.)

"Ever met this neighbour you're having problems with?" The Lord asked.

His ability to get straight to the heart of every matter never ceased to amaze me. "Ah, no," I answered.

"Know his dog well do you. Friendly? Playful? Male? Female? Old? Young? You could describe what it looks like?"

"Um, no.." He'd got me again. "But it's big. Real big. I know that. And it's confirmed by the size of it's um - er - deposits."

"It seems to me before you can deal with the 'unwanted deposits' problem you need to get to know your neighbour and his dog."

"Surely that's not necessary!"

"No?" countered the Lord. "How did your neighbour respond when you told him about the problem over the phone?"

"He was really apologetic."

"Didn't yell and scream at you?"

"No."

"And this was the first time you'd ever spoken to him?"

"Yes."

"So you'd never even said 'hello' over the fence before?"

"No."

"And when you rang him - the first actual contact you actually had with him - to complain about his dog, he was really friendly."

"Well, now you mention it, yes."

"Sounds like a nice guy to me," said the Lord.

"Maybe, but now he hangs up on me," I came back.

"Yell at you it does he? Scream abuse? Slams the phone in your ear?"

"Actually, no. Just hangs up."

"And apart from those phone calls," continued the Lord, making me feel like I was on trial, "you've never spoken to this guy, waved to him – nothing?"

Sometimes the Lord could really put you on the spot. Even though wasn't your fault. I said nothing.

"Perhaps," said the Lord, "this dog is lonely. May be it comes over to your place a lot cos you've got kids, you're often out in the yard, it's a nice place ..." he paused, waiting.

I got the point. "Okay," I conceded, "it's possible."

The Lord continued, "May be the guy has trouble trying to keep the dog in. Maybe he'd appreciate some help. He could work long hours – you don't know anything about him do you? Whether he has children, a wife, whatever ..."

I was beginning to wish I'd just forgiven the guy for the four hundred and ninety first time and shut up. Now I was actually going to have to do something. It was going to be me going out of my way, and I wasn't the one with the problem. But I could try and shorten the process. "Why don't you just tell me about the guy and his dog?" I asked the Lord. "After all you know, and I know you know, and it would save a whole lot of trouble."

The Lord chuckled – too heartily for my liking – and said: "You know it doesn't work like that. But I will tell you what to do."

At least that was something. "Well, then," I said. "Tell me."

"Go over and meet him. Walk round there and introduce yourself to the guy. Be a neighbour."

"But what if he punches me on the nose?" I asked.

"That doesn't seem likely does it?"

"Well what if he sets his dog on me. Slams the door in my face."

The Lord however was typically unmoved by my excuses.

Which is how I found myself walking up the dog owner's driveway. Brandon and Paul were beside me carrying a bag of bones for the dog. I had a couple of cans of beer, and a couple of cola under my arm.

As I knocked on the front door, I had to admit that I felt a whole lot better than I had when I was preparing to dump that shovelful over the back fence!

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Love your enemies and pray for those who hurt you

- how's that ever going to work out!?

well, Jesus was confident that you and me here today could give it our best shot and that it would make a difference

- so how about this:

*Let's all take a moment to have a serious think about this coming week and who is the one person I will give my coat to, go the extra mile for, forgive, or simply pray for? It might be a family member; a neighbour; someone you work with; a person you are involved with in some way. Let's not make it too hard. Let's be real. One person. One situation. And do what that 'real bloke' did: take Jesus' words at face value. Love, in this case, your enemy. Pray for the person who mistreated you. Tough love I know. But Jesus assures us it will make a real difference. So let's take that moment to think, then I will conclude in prayer.*