

Matthew 5:38-48 Working in the Cracks



How many of you have noticed
that in your driveway
no matter how hard you try
or how many times you use that weed killer,
every spring and summer,
that darn weed grows right back up
through the crack?

Or have you ever had a house
with a crack in the foundation?
That's a big no-no.

When we were selling our first house,
we got so close to closing
with the first buyer,
but then she got cold feet
because of a previously repaired crack
in the foundation.

Even though we had an expert
come out and verify
that it was no longer an issue or problem,
the buyer backed out
because she was so worried
about that crack.

I accidentally dropped something
on the corner of a plate
we received as a wedding gift
and tried, very carefully
to glue it back together.
It just doesn't look the same, does it?



I certainly don't use the plate
to actually hold anything;
not because it is a Tennessee plate
(that's what some of you are thinking),
but because of a crack like that!

A cracked coffee cup
that doesn't hold coffee anymore
is no good.

A vase with a crack down the side
that lets water leak out
is not something you set
on your grandmother's antique
dining room buffet.

It is safe to say that in most cases
if something has crack in it,
it isn't any good any more.
Walls begin to crumble
when there are cracks.
Eggs get all kinds of sticky
and messy when they crack.

And what about when societies and cultures;
what about when community and churches
begin to show cracks?
Don't we know what happens then?
Unrest. Oppression.
Falsehood is triumphed over truth.
Palpable tension. Riots. Marches.
Protests. War.
I'm not telling you anything you don't know.

It's all around us right now.
Those cracks are getting bigger and bigger.
And not just here

but just about everywhere, I'm willing to wager.



Some of you are old enough
to nod your heads if I mention
the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

In 1965, marchers trying gain voting rights
marched from Selma to Montgomery
and to cross the Alabama River
you had to use
the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

That day became known
as **Bloody Sunday** because
non-violent marchers were beaten
by State Troopers.



The bridge had been named after a man
who was not only a two-term senator
and Confederate general but also
a Grand Dragon in the Alabama Klu Klux clan.

So even in the 1940's,
the naming of that bridge
sent a clear message to everyone—

“They wanted to stamp that — to brand it —
with this vision of the South
as very much as a ...

a world dedicated to white supremacy.”¹

The crack of the Civil Right Movement
didn't begin in the 1960's;
we all know that crack of racial prejudice
began long, long ago.

What do we think about the cracks
when we hear statistics
that in 2014 the Office of Veteran Affairs
estimated that there were
49,933 homeless veterans²
on any given night?



This number is in decline,
but no one will argue
that men and women who willingly
put themselves in the business of protecting our country,
offering aid and protection to other countries;
no one will argue that they shouldn't be taken care of.
They deserve better from us.

Let's talk about our real home turf.

The crack in the church.
It is becoming less and less important
in our lives—maybe not to you today
because, well, you're here.
But over all, across the board,
culturally—you betcha.
We need a day off
from the relentless pace of work.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/03/05/391041989/the-racist-history-behind-the-iconic-selma-bridge>

Melanie Peeples quoting Prof. John Giggie

² <https://www.va.gov/opa/issues/Homelessness.asp>



We want the best for our kids
so we sign them up for the travel team
even though they play all their games on Sunday.
And Wednesday.

The Christian religion as it is presented today
doesn't fit the bill for most people anymore.

The loudest voices in our Christian family tree
can sometimes sound more hate-filled
than loving.

But my goodness,
isn't that depressing?

How about good word preacher?
How about some good news
that will make us feel better
after you've made us feel so badly.

Give us hope and empower us!

This is the DIY generation;
the Chip and Joanna's the Flip or Flop's;
tell us something to do
so that we can get down to work
and fix these cracks!

**Well guess what,
it ain't our job to fix the cracks.
It is our job to live in them.**

Let's read Jesus's words again
—after all this is his instruction:

“Be perfect, therefore,
as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Do you feel better?

I don't;
because if there is anything we are
it isn't perfect.

And it makes me tired to even think
about being perfect.

Perfect is what we have to be at work Jesus.

Perfect is how we have to act at church Jesus.

*Perfect is the husband, the wife, the student,
the athlete, the whatever we have to be
everywhere else;*

*so please Jesus don't tell us
we have to be perfect here,
with you too.*

Isn't that how we feel

with a lot of what Jesus says to us
in the sermon on the mount?

Surely what you are saying Jesus
isn't meant to be taken literally.

Particularly here with these verses.

We aren't hearing,

blessed are the meek or the mourners.

Nope, today it's turn the other cheek,
walk the extra mile,

give them all your clothes
till there's nothing left to give.

I'd be willing to bet

that most of us have been stepped on
by the world too much

to give these words real meat to their bones.

Isn't this about the ideal community,

the ideal society,
the ideal Christian?

Turn the other cheek

just means ignore the haters, right?

Walk the extra mile carrying someone else's pack
means dig your heels in

and do it even if you don't like it, right?

When someone sues you for your coat,

give them your shirt too,

means don't get sued in the first place, right?

No, no, and no.

What Jesus says is, *Be perfect.*

In the Message,
when Eugene Peterson re-wrote this passage,
he wrote it like this,
so, hear it in a new way:

“Live generously and graciously toward others,
the way God lives toward you.”

“Here's another old saying
that deserves a second look:
'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.'
Is that going to get us anywhere?
Here's what I propose:
'Don't hit back at all.'
If someone strikes you,
stand there and take it.
If someone drags you to court
and sues for the shirt off you back,
giftwrap your best coat
and make a present of it.

And if someone takes unfair advantage of you,
use the occasion
to practice the servant life.
No more tit-for-tat stuff.
Live generously.

You're familiar with the old written law,
'Love your friend,'
and its unwritten companion,
'Hate your enemy.'
I'm challenging that.
I'm telling you to love your enemies.
Let them bring out the best in you,
not the worst.

When someone gives you a hard time,
respond with the energies of prayer,
for then you are working out of your true selves,
your God-created selves.

This is what God does.

He gives his best—
the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—
to everyone, regardless:
the good and bad,
the nice and nasty.

If all you do is love the loveable,
do you expect a bonus?

Anybody can do that.

If you simply say hello
to those who greet you,
do you expect a medal?

Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

“In a word, what I’m saying is,

Grow up.

You’re kingdom subjects.

Now live like it.

Live out your God-created identity.

Live generously and graciously toward others,
the way God lives toward you.”

When we read something like that,
we preachers will say,
that’ll preach.

Live generously.

You know those cracks, the ones we can name
they appear in large part

because **we forget**

that we belong to each other.

We are really good at putting ourselves
into different camps.

You know the democrats
or the republicans.

The ones with insurance
and the ones without.
The Falcons fans and the Patriots fans,
SEC or ACC.
The Presbyterians,
the Baptist, the Lutherans.
The straight, the gay, the...you get the idea.

In some ways it is natural
to put ourselves in to different categories,
seems to be human nature.
But it's when we keep ourselves in isolated camps
and when we don't let the pain,
or the suffering
or the love of someone else not like us
—when we don't let that break
and crack open our heart,
we could call that sin.

Because **we belong to each other.**

Using your backhand to slap someone,
usually meant they were your slave,
you had power over them.
When we turn the other cheek,
we aren't passively accepting abuse,
we are saying to the oppressor
you do not have the power to dominate me;
you do not have the power
to continue to make me the victim,
I won't play into the roles of victim and victimizer.



Roman rule said a soldier could only force
a civilian to carry his pack one mile
and no more.

Willingly carrying that pack another mile
would have surprised that soldier
and in **that** new space

a different relationship can form;

one that says *we don't have to be enemies.*

In fact if I show you love instead of hate,

I change the rules of the game.

Loving your enemies
is the kind of wholeness
that God displays.³



And speaking of...

God doesn't waste energy dividing up life,
the sun and the rain isn't given out
in varying portions
as to whether people are deserving or not.

Apparently it doesn't matter
how we have divided ourselves up;
political parties or haves and have not's,
even believers and non-believers.

³ ibid

The scandalous love of God
is that life is poured out
in the same abundance for us all.⁴
Which is what Jesus is trying to tell us.
Live like that.
Live out your days
believing that you belong to each other
just like you belong to God.
Live out your days generously.



You see, “[d]iscipleship requires “working the cracks”
to transform especially the situations
of oppression and injustice
that disciples will encounter in the world.”⁵

Parker Palmer says,
As it stands we can only read
the holy words of scripture
and for a while they sit on top of our heart.
It is only when the heart breaks
that the words are able to fall inside
and find a home.

How is that for a crack?
Be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect.
Live generously just as God lives generously toward you.

So that’s it friends.

⁴ Karla McClurg, Healing the Divide <http://inwardoutward.org/the-story/>

⁵ Stan Saunders, Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God’s Presence Westminster John Knox, 2010

We are called to work in those cracks.

Those breaks in the wall?

Get down and go deep.

Those breaks in the old racial
and patriarchal foundation,

work in them living and abiding

with the oppressed and the victim.

Those cracks in the way we care for each other?

We are called to step up and dig in

for the broken and abused.

There will always be cracks, always.

But if we agreed to work together

then the cracks get filled in

with a promised pay off.

That's right, there's a pay off.

The pay off is

that when we do the things

Jesus tells us to do;

when we disciples

are willing to work in the cracks,

the reign of God **is present**.

That's right, the kingdom of God is near.

And in this kingdom

we all belong to each other.

In the glorious reign of God,

the partisanship of politics

cannot divide and conqueror.

In the kingdom of our Lord

there's no need to debate the Affordable Care Act,

because the Great physician and healer says,

I have come not for the well but for the sick.

I believe in the kingdom and reign of God,

love is love is love,

and that it is lived out

in sacred spaces and relationships

that seek to heal and enlarge partners and spouses.



The other pay off

is that we do not need to attempt
to live and work in the cracks alone.

“The practice Jesus illustrates

here [in the sermon on the mount]
are not best undertaken by solitary individuals.

They require the support of sustaining communities
to nurture vision and strategic perspective,
to monitor situations of intentional engagement,
and to intervene as needed
in support of the vulnerable.”⁶

Live generously.

Let us live generously together;
let’s be the sustaining community that is constantly
working and living out
the generous and scandalous
love of God in the cracks.

The Apostle Paul says, “so faith comes

from what is heard,” (Rom. 10:17)

and this must be why Jesus repeatedly says,

“you have heard it said, but I say to you...”⁷

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

“You’re kingdom subjects.

Now live like it.

Live out your God-created identity.

Live generously and graciously toward others,

the way God lives toward you.”

⁶ ibid

⁷ Matthew Myer Boulton, *Matthew 5:38-48 Feasting on the Word Year A Advent Through Transfiguration* Westminster John Knox Press,

Benediction

Have you heard the saying, “knowledge is only rumor until it lives in the body?” Well it’s true. We must know, not just on paper, not just in our head, but in the very depths of our hearts, our very bodies that we belong to each other and we are called to live that out generously. When we do, the reign of God is present, which means of course that the kingdom of God is where we least expect it, ready to be born in you.