From time to time, when they know I am in a time crunch to get a sermon ready for Sunday, someone will ask why I don't just get an old sermon out and use it. It's not like I couldn't do that. I keep copies of every sermon I preach. Since we Lutherans use a three-year lectionary, it means that the same Bible texts come around every three years. There are plenty of used sermons to choose from in the filing cabinet in my office. My usual answer when asked why I don't dip into them is that I don't feel like it's ethical to regularly raid the sermon drawers. My call is to try to interpret God's Word at a particular time and in a particular place. The context of an old sermon might be completely different that the one we're all in now.

All of what I just said is true. But there is another reason I don't use old sermons when I'm strapped for time. It's because a lot of time they aren't very good. I think that my preaching has improved over the past twenty seven years, so some of my earliest sermons are actually painful for me to read. It makes me wonder what I was thinking when I wrote them. Why was I trying so hard to make God's word conform to my clever turn of a phrase? How did the people in the pews put up with my stuttering, rambling attempts at proclaiming the gospel? I'm spared from many of my first sermons because they literally rotted after my basement flooded. I suppose it's a fitting end to the worst of them.

But then weeks like this come along. It gets to be Friday afternoon very quickly. I didn't have time earlier in the week to start thinking about a sermon like I usually do. So I made a quick trip to the office and pulled out the file for Matthew 5:38-48. “Please, God, let me find something I can build a sermon around,” I prayed. I pulled out a sermon from three years ago. That wasn't so far back. Maybe there would be something there that would light a spark. And then I saw that made me cringe. Apparently, I made the decision to focus on Jesus' instructions in his mountaintop sermon: “Be perfect, therefore, as your father in heaven is perfect.” I started by talking about baseball, one of my favorite topics. Specifically, I wrote about a perfect game in baseball, what it is, how rare it is, how several years ago, there were two perfect games in a 20-day period. I rambled on for a bit, then, near the end, I came up with this: “Like the major league pitcher, we are called to use the very best skills and talent given to us by God to achieve the highest goal.  *Then some blah, blah, blah.*  Then Jesus calls us to go out and forgive and love others as together, with the help of God, we pitch a perfect game for God's kingdom.” It's lame, I know. And I'm sorry. I didn't even come close to the message of the gospel story.

Here's what I wish I had said. Jesus' instructions to those who would be his disciples are harsh and hard: “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Be perfect. Is that what Jesus is saying we need to do to be children of God? Because if it is, then count me out. There is no way I can do any of the things Jesus commands on anything like a consistent basis. All of them? Forget it. It would seem that Jesus is asking the impossible until we take another look. The Greek word Jesus uses for “be perfect” is the word “telos” which literally means “becoming” or “living into.” It would appear that Jesus is saying something like, “Become who you are meant to be,” or “Live into the person or body of Christ that God intends you to be.” God in Christ alone is perfect. We are meant to grow in God's love so that we come closer to being who God created us to be every single day. It doesn't exactly let us off the hook. As individuals and as a community, we come back again and again to scripture, to the promises made to us as God's beloved creation, the promises of everlasting love, forgiveness and resurreciton life made real for us by Jesus.

David Lose writes, “Jesus [is] the one who not only talked the talk of love but walked the walk, treading steadfastly to Jerusalem, enduring the shame and humiliation of the cross, embracing death itself...all so that we might know, experience, and trust just how much God loves us and thereby have abundant life. This Jesus not only commands, he also understands, understands just how hard it is for us to love rather than hate, to forgive rather than begrudge...to share rather than hoard, to heal rather than wound, especially when we ourselves walk so much of our lives wounded and hurt.”

The thing is, the more we know and believe and feel that we are loved, the more we are able to love others, to forgive and embrace and heal. This is what I believe God is asking of us: to live into the grace and love of Christ that enables us to do what we never could do on our own. When we get it wrong, Christ forgives. When we come even a tiny step toward getting it right, the little bit of world around us becomes a better place. Jesus is quite clear about what he expects of us as his followers. These expectations are so difficult that the only thing we can do is study Jesus' words and actions to see how he calls us to live. We are to welcome the stranger. Give ourselves away as bread for the hungry. Stand up for the oppressed. Seek peace in all things. Touch those no one else will touch. Clothe the naked. Love those the world says are unloveable. Not only pray for our enemies but love them.

When Billy and I were in Spain, we worshiped in a Catholic church with an English-speaking Irish priest. It was an interesting combination. One week, Father Daly spoke about how difficult it is to be the body of Christ in the world today. He reminded us that we all live in the same world and that our actions as Christians can have great consequences for others. He talked about how much the world needs to see Christ's grace and love lived out in the lives of Christ's body. Father Daly told the congregation, “Don't be afraid to be Christians in the world out there.” I just love that instruction because it gets to the heart of why we sometimes resist growing into who God wants us to be. It can be hard to speak love in a world where many are unloved, to forgive when it's easier to hold a grudge, to heal rather than wound, to embrace and share when it would be simpler to walk away. But we ***are*** growing into who God has created us to be. Sometimes that means we speak a different or challenging word at work or around our friends, that we move toward thinking more about the needs of others than our own, that we see the other as brother or sister and not enemy. And when we stumble and fall? We are lifted by the love that surpasses all love. We are dusted off and turned around and pushed in the direction we should have been going in the first place.

I like Father Daly's words so much that I plan to use them as our dismissal each week, so that we all leave here on the same page. Instead of “Go in peace. Serve the Lord,” I will say “Don't be afraid to be Christians out there this week,” and your reply will stay the same, “Thanks be to God,” as if it were a privilege to serve God in this way. Because it is, you know. We'll start today and when we come back next week, we'll get our batteries charged and get back out there again.

That's what I wish I had said in the first place. Thanks be to God for second chances. Amen.

*Epiphany 7A*

*February 19, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 5:38-48*