

**MESSAGE: “*The Second Mile*”**

**Text: Matthew 5:38-48**

**Purpose: the purpose of this message is to illustrate Jesus’ teaching on ‘the second mile’ in ancient times and in the present day, and to challenge the congregation to put it into practice.**

The man was tired as he walked toward his home in the village of Bethsaida. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up,” he complained to himself, “Here I am, almost seventy-years-old, and I am still cutting stone from the quarry. I can feel the dust in my chest—I can’t go on forever.”

He was so lost in thought that he did not notice the Roman soldiers approaching him in the opposite direction. “Hey you!” one soldier called out from some distance away, “carry this pack to the next stage—it’s weighing us down.”

The startled man stared in disbelief, and then he became angry, though he did not dare show his anger to the soldiers. “Have these Roman fools no compassion? Can’t they see I’ve been working to exhaustion? They are young, and I am not, yet they need me to carry their pack!” Even as these thoughts hammered his mind, he hurried over to pick up the bulky provisions. A law is a law, even if unjust, and it would not do to resist. The man had seen fellow Galileans flogged for resisting.

“One mile,” he reminded himself, “just one mile.” The Roman soldiers walked ahead of him, joking with one another. He walked behind haltingly, stumbling as he went. Each step took him further from home—further from his family. His wife would be worried he knew. How he resented the occupation presence of the callous Roman legion!

Having little else to think about as he walked, the man reflected on the words of that mountaintop preacher, Jesus of Nazareth. He certainly is a remarkable person. The words of Moses never seemed as vivid as they did when he was speaking them. Still, it seems crazy to expect someone to turn the other cheek to one who has been abusive. And as for that bit about ‘walking a second mile,’ forget it. That’s inhumane. The law is unjust to begin with.

The man’s thoughts were interrupted by one of the soldiers. “You can stop now—you’ve done your piece.” The man paused for a moment, hardly believing the words he began to speak, “I am not too tired, and there is no one else around to carry your pack for you. I will carry it a bit further.” This time it was the soldiers who stared in disbelief.

**As they resumed the journey, the soldiers walked on either side of the man and asked him why he was willing to do such a thing. The man recounted the words of Jesus and realized that he no longer walked behind enemies, but with companions along life's way.**

**Jesus had a way of turning natural attitudes and actions upside down and inside out. The one who would be first in God's kingdom must be servant of all. The one who wants to save his life must release it to God. The one who is struck on one cheek should not retaliate, but should turn the other cheek to the avenger. The one who is forced to walk a mile carrying the pack of a Roman soldier should offer to walk a second as an act of godly charity.**

**These statements which Jesus delivered in his mountainside sermon are the source of both admiration and resentment. What could be more gracious than 'loving one's enemy?' We admire someone like Pope John Paul II when, after his initial recovery, he went to the jail-cell of his near-assassin to forgive and pray with him. We admire him because we suppose that he had a justified right to retaliate. Jesus is saying that the disciple should waive this right interpersonally.**

**When Moses recorded the words, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' he was setting forth guidelines for a judicial order. In an age when revenge and retaliation, the law of the Hatfields and McCoys ruled, it was necessary to limit the penalty for an offense in such a way that mass killing would not follow every real or supposed offense.**

**In the legal system of Jesus' day, penalties for many offenses were commuted to some form of payment with the exception of murder which continued to be punishable by death. This was fine for a legal system based on justice, but Jesus insists that justice does not go far enough. Interpersonal relationships are to be based on something even more exacting than justice; they are to be based on love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy and redemption.**

**While we admire those who practice Jesus' command to 'love your enemy,' we resent his telling us that we must surrender our right to retaliate when someone wrongs us. The resentment deepens when we equate his words with being a doormat for others to tread over. Should evil never be resisted? Should victims of abuse never press charges against the abuser? Should Christians passively dismiss wrongdoing?**

**If you look comprehensively at the life of Jesus, you will see that he was not always passive in the face of evil. On the contrary, think of him overturning the temple tables of moneychangers who were exploiting pilgrims visiting Jerusalem to worship God. Think of the strident ways he confronted scribes, Pharisees and teachers of law for the sin of hypocrisy. Think of the way he challenged the high priest himself in court. Throughout his**

ministry, Jesus championed truth and the marginalized, but he did not seek personal revenge. Instead, he prayed, “Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.”

When someone violates our boundaries, steps on our rights, or abuses us, we naturally feel a righteous anger. It is our right—more than that—it is our responsibility to challenge wrongdoing and to champion truth; however, we rarely stop there. We press it too far. We cross over into personal revenge, getting even. We nurse the offense in our minds, rehearsing it over and over and over, keeping it fresh, remembered, and painful.

We know that the first mile we walked was forced upon us when we were defenseless and vulnerable. It is not fair. It is not just. Now that we are stronger, we not only refuse to walk further, but we want to recover that first mile, too. But we cannot. The inconvenience and pain of the first mile is part of our personal past; it must be accepted and grieved. The opportunity to chart a new course is before us. Do we dare to walk a second mile in order to gain a companion along life’s way?

What might a second mile look like today? I have a friend named Barbara Geissinger. Some years ago, she and her husband Warren received the call that no parent ever wants to receive. Their daughter, their only child, was killed in a crash at the Hooksett, New Hampshire toll booth. An inebriated driver, making no effort to stop, plowed right into her vehicle and she was instantly killed. The Geissinger’s were devastated, and the offending driver, who survived without injury, was sentenced to prison. That was, however, of little comfort to the Geissinger’s.

In desperation, Barbara drew upon her faith. She could not change the reality, but she could shape her response to it. She decided to visit the prison and meet with her daughter’s killer. With a broken heart, she exposed the pain she felt yet also offered forgiveness. That was certainly walking the second mile, but she did not stop there. She worked with him to develop a program, based on their story, which could be shared in high schools across the state.

“If anyone forces you to walk one mile, go also the second mile...” Jesus did just that when he walked the Via Dolorosa to the cross. Pope John Paul II and Barbara did so when they visited a jail-cell. What might happen in our lives, if we took the words of Jesus seriously and walked the distance?