

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

February 12, 2023

VI Epiphany, Matthew 5:38-48

For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you,
are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?ⁱ

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.ⁱⁱ *Amen.*

For my sixteenth birthday, my mother bought me tickets to see AC/DC at Hirsch Memorial Coliseum in Shreveport, Louisiana.ⁱⁱⁱ Given what cassettes I am certain she would have preferred I kept in my tape deck, the gift constituted a significant expression of love. Even more consequential, the concert was scheduled for a Monday night. Parcel to the gift, she granted me two accommodations: first, to forego school on the day of the show so that I could get in line early, and then to sleep late the next day, allowing my weary, Rocked-out soul time for recovery. One friend, Jeff,^{iv} achieved like permission – by what means, I never knew – and at 7:30 A.M. on February 11, my mother dropped Jeff and me in the Hirsch parking lot with our tickets and \$20 for t-shirts and food. Even at that early hour there were already a dozen people in line – a haggard crew of hardcore devotees who had clearly camped out the night before.

Recall of those days, people still knew how to Rock, and concerts at Hirsch remained as God intended: General Admission. General Admission promised that the one who showed up earliest earned the best seat, which, of course, wasn't a seat at all, but a place to stand immediately in front of the stage. If occupying that precious square footage required skipping school, then so be it (I sensed that for most of us arriving at that hour and for that band, skipping work was likely not an issue).

Taking stock of our immediate company and calculating the hit our Rock credibility suffered when we got out of my mom's brown Taurus,^v Jeff and I determined we would risk our position in line to restore firmer footing with our fellow concertgoers; we headed to the gas station on the corner and bought a pack of Marlboro Red cigarettes and two lighters. The lighters were, of course, not only for the cigarettes but for holding up and gently waving when, presumably,^{vi} AC/DC would play their one ballad, "Ride On."^{vii}

After a half-pack of full-strength Philip Morris on an empty-stomach, I was pretty sure I would die, there at the foot of my heavy-metal Canaan. I did not, however, let on about my nearing demise. Rather I did what Rock-n-Rollers do: I walked over to the bushes, saw to the unfortunate business, and then I Rocked on.

As more and more fans arrived – by noon, *at least* twenty more people had joined us in line – accomplishment swelled my nicotine breast: yes, refined taste had gathered this nascent communion, yet the line’s order established an unassailable hierarchy within the realm. As Jesus had encouraged, some of us had endeavored a second mile, and each later arriving Rocker who peered around their place in the queue seemed to tip their trucker’s cap in the direction of us in front, their telepathy clarion clear: “Well done, and may there always be Rock for you.”

In this morning’s Gospel appointment, Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount we have heard the last two Sundays.^{viii} In today’s rhetorical turn, he positions the Law of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy as a foil to a new Christian ethic. Those familiar Hebrew Testament standards intended to prescribe limits to revenge, and the crowd Jesus teaches would have known their instruction by heart: *You have heard it said*, Jesus begins, “if any harm follows [another’s mistreatment of you], then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe”^{ix} ... “But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.”^x

That catalogue of reciprocal violence sits painfully on the tongue, and Jesus’ commission rejects any permission for “two wrongs to make a right.” Jesus challenges his followers to reveal compassion, rather than contempt when suffering mistreatment, and he offers five examples to press his point: “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 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.”^{xi} Jesus establishes a new standard that does not excuse any unloving behavior because of circumstance.

Repeating the same rhetorical device, Jesus presses even further: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?”^{xii}

Noting the indiscriminate sun (rising on good and evil, alike) and rain (falling on the righteous and the unrighteous),^{xiii} Jesus reiterates the priority of the Christian ethic. The Christian must never allow a situation to determine their behavior, after all, “Do not even the tax-collectors” manage that much faithfulness?^{xiv} “And if you greet [lovingly] only your brothers and sisters, do not even”^{xv} those who have never heard of the Law abide that baseline of decency? No, Jesus’ followers must “be perfect, as [their] heavenly Father is perfect.”^{xvi}

Hirsch opened its doors at 6:30, eleven hours after Jeff and I arrived. We ran to the stage in what seemed like a fog ... and, as it turned out, was a fog – of special-effects smoke pouring from a large cauldron on one side of the stage. The opening band began a troubled^{xvii} forty-five-minute set at 9:00, an hour later than my ticket stub promised. Jeff and I, holding fast the security rails immediately in front of the stage, could hear only our compatriot, early-birds’ screams of “Angus! Angus!” cries for the 5’2”, school-boy-uniform-clad lead guitarist of the headliners.

At 10:30 the lights finally dimmed, and AC/DC blew my eardrums, if not my mind. An enormous bell descended from the ceiling for one of their most famous tunes; buckets of fake money – featuring Angus instead of a president – fell like confetti during “Money Talks,” a cut from their most recent album; and, finally, canons fired during their show-stopper, “For Those About to Rock, We Salute You.”^{xviii} The Aussie rockers finished at 1:00 A.M, and as we left, we bought overpriced, undersized T-shirts,^{xix} before falling into my father’s truck hours after we told him we would.^{xx}

Jesus’ concluding hyperbole – “be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” – calls his disciples to stop confusing the *means* of their faithful living for their lives’ deepest purpose ... *to stop confusing the means of their faithful living for their lives’ deepest purpose*. Jesus challenges attention to the Law as a shield against having their heart changed, against accepting their responsibility to change the world. Rather than following the Law as an expression of Love, the disciples were fulfilling only the minimum obligations that still allowed indulging a reciprocal wrong for a wrong. Rather than living in loving ways that pointed toward the unconditional Love of God, their lives pointed no further than the Law itself, and, by this minimalism, the Law had become slack.

Perhaps at its best, we might claim Rock seeks freedom^{xxi} as its deepest purpose – a mode of escape attractive to a teenager – but after eighteen hours of devoting myself to its rituals, my legs ached from the standing; my stomach cramped from the absence of food and water; and my head spun from the whole affair. Despite proudly wearing my concert t-shirt (and reeking of the night before), by the time I walked into Mrs. Wynne’s calculus class late the next morning,^{xxii} I was already wrestling an unsettling truth: I was not fit for the Rock life.

In time, I would accept Rock-n-Roll’s means *as* my end. I would read *Kerrang!* and grow out my hair, visit hole-in-the-wall clubs to see the loudest, coolest bands and follow much of Rock’s unwritten law, but I purposefully kept my allegiances two, three – *ten* – steps removed from the stage and its security rail. At the end of the day, I aspired more than emphysema and ill-fitting leather britches, and as much as I enjoyed – and remain a true believer – in the transcendent power of jam-packed humans setting aside all else on earth to sing in unison a song every one of them knows by heart (it’s not so bad when church feels like this, by the way), I listened to my favorite bands on my Walkman in a library carrel while I did my homework.

When we as Christians excuse our own unloving behavior – indulging in cruelty, judgement, petty sniping – because of a detail we deem out of place in our family home, or a disagreement we choose as disqualifying among friends, or a demand untended as a priority by our neighborhood council – we reduce our faith to nothing more than a leisure pursuit, a hobby we tinker when convenient.

Here in church, if our life together does not point beyond a precious ministry we clench and claim as our entitlement, or past coddled memories of those bygone days we idealize; then we turn the treasures of our faith – scriptures and songs, the crosses around our neck – into mere keepsakes, little more than concert merch.

Indeed, if our Sunday rituals point no further than a particular rite or style or “standard,” then we might as well trade incense for dry ice, wine and bread for whiskey and edibles, our vesture for glummy belts and chest-hair combs, for we will have turned our worship into a self-righteous tool of our own satisfaction; our lives will not point toward God, but toward our own needs for status and attention.

And if that illustration feels cheap – undignified or tawdry – well that’s because it is ... and, more dangerously, maybe because in moments it rings true: **that we have become fans of Jesus, rather than his followers.**

Beloved, Jesus calls us to aim all our lives toward the God of Love, every day a loyal devotion – *always* a means and *never* an end – the humble labor of renewing our own hearts for the sake of renewing the world ... loving God and loving one another more and better with every breath, in all we do. By this faithfulness, we become perfect in Peace, perfect in Hope, perfect in Love.

That we would endeavor nothing less, I pray with gladness and singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 3:3.

ⁱⁱ From Psalm 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hirsch – a venue from another era, when the biggest acts on earth visited places like Shreveport: not only Aerosmith, AC/DC, and Bon Jovi, but also Run-D.M.C and R.E.M.

^{iv} Jeff, a super dang smart and kind human, was always cooler than I was. He had an older brother whose musical taste benefited me, even from a distance. I am still grateful that Jeff undertook this Rock mission with me.

^v I mean, this was the most 80s mom car of all time.

^{vi} We presumed wrong: AC/DC doesn’t play “Ride On” live; they stick to the rockers.

^{vii} As I recently shared with the staff, at a worship service many years ago, I noticed an anthem listed in the leaflet as “Ride On.” My heart leapt! “I know this one,” I thought to myself ... but I did not. As it happens, the Trinity choirs will sing Hall Johnson’s “Ride On” next Sunday, a moving piece, if very different from the Bon Scott verse.

^{viii} Matthew 5:1-12 on IV Epiphany (January 29) and 5:13-20 on V Epiphany (February 5). I value these Lectionary runs of uninterrupted continuity. Even so, I scooted us ahead one Sunday to a lesson (5:38-48) we would not otherwise have heard in this three-year cycle.

^{ix} Exodus 20:22, 21:24.

^x Matthew 5:39.

^{xi} Matthew 5:38-42.

^{xii} Matthew 5:43-46a.

^{xiii} Matthew 5:45.

^{xiv} Matthew 5:46b.

^{xv} Matthew 5:47.

^{xvi} Matthew 5:48.

^{xvii} King's X. The crowd deafeningly chanted "AC ... DC" for most of their set.

^{xviii} The euphoria I felt during that closer *almost* makes up for the hearing loss I suffered as a result.

^{xix} Among my proudest accomplishments, my daughter wears this shirt all the time.

^{xx} Realize that we had to coordinate these changes via the pay phones located in the (really gross) corridors of Hirsch, and then find my dad's truck among the thousands of other vehicles queued along Greenwood Road.

^{xxi} "Freedom-from," rather than "Freedom-for," unfortunately.

^{xxii} To her credit, Mrs. Wynne was having none of it. She was super mad.