



## **YOUTH DAY (Ages 13–17) (ADDRESSNG YOUTH VIOLENCE)**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, June 26, 2011**

**Quentin Samuels, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

3<sup>rd</sup>-year M.Div. student, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA

**Lection – Matthew 5:44-45** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 44) But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (v. 45) so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Youth Day is an opportunity for congregations to engage the next generation in the liturgical and theological experiences of the faith community. Some congregations understand this Sunday as a time for the youth to take an active role in the leadership, planning, and structure of the worship service. Quite often during this service, the youth choir leads the musical selections, the sacred arts/dance ministry performs, and the youth pastor presides over the preaching moment. One of

the central purposes of Youth Day is to showcase the impact that youth can have on the collective fellowship of the congregation.

While not forsaking the significance of Youth Day and its value to the faith community, African American churches and the leadership that govern must take seriously the responsibility of incorporating youth in all activities of ministry and congregational life. Youth have constructive and insightful perspectives on what ministerial approaches would best serve not only current members of the church but also those the church is attempting to serve within the larger society. The perspectives of youth relate to the sustainability of the local church and its capacity to remain relevant to the needs of its congregational community.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 5:44-45**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Violence among youth in the United States has reached critical mass. More specifically, the African American community is disproportionately affected by violence and crime. A Center for Disease Control (CDC) report confirmed that homicide was the second leading cause of death for individuals between the ages of 10 to 24.<sup>1</sup> According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency prevention, African American youth account for a significant number of youth in the United States arrested and prosecuted for violent offenses.<sup>2</sup>

How has violence become a staple employed by our youth in resolving conflicts? At what point did the influence of peers, media, and pop culture overshadow the impact and voice of the Church in the lives of our youth? These, as well as others, are critical questions that the Church must contend with if it desires to: (1) have conversations about the issues that are prevalent to the realities of contemporary youth in our society and (2) serve as an alternative space for youth to empower themselves and each other using the message of Jesus Christ.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The Gospel of Matthew serves as the first of three Synoptic Gospels, and its authorship is attributed to the apostle Matthew. The Gospel describes and defines a figure named Jesus, whose narratives and ministry are central to the first-century Christian claim of Jesus as Teacher, Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man. For Matthew, each of these designations serves a unique function within the larger context of Matthew's interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Matthew was written for a community that related to Jesus and his teachings in a specific, predetermined way. Numerous scholars have argued that Matthew was composed after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. This cataclysmic event left the relatively infant Christian community and distinctly Jewish community without a central location of worship, pilgrimage, and spiritual commerce. This tumultuous socio-cultural and religious environment is where one locates the audience of Matthew.

Jesus is presented as Messiah in the Gospel of Matthew and also functions as a teacher usurping the authority of the Pharisees during a time of Jewish spiritual and physical reorganization. Moreover, Jesus as Messiah in Matthew provides a narrative for a community seeking to affirm

its identity as one aligned with the salvific agenda of God and establishes its own authority under the scope of Torah.

Matthew 5:44-45 is a smaller passage within a larger narrative of what has been traditionally identified as the Sermon on the Mount, comprised of Matthew 5–7. Today’s text in Matthew depicts Jesus teaching his disciples a series of parables which are encased in lessons regarding righteous living and the model for true discipleship. Jesus begins to teach his audience (beginning in verse 43) a radical conception of love for one another. He says in verse 43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” Here he references the Old Testament law to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) with the implied understanding of hating the enemy. The terms “neighbor” and “enemy” were specific classifications that the Jewish community would have employed to determine which individuals and groups possessed the prerequisites to be loved and which individuals or groups were to be viewed through the lenses of distrust and contempt. To regard one as an enemy during this period would mean that any actions taken towards them would be justified in light of the responsibility to *only* love the neighbor as thyself. Moreover, if one initiates violence towards their enemy, it is validated by the belief that it is acceptable to hate one’s enemy as long as one loves their neighbor.

In verses 44 and 45, Jesus seeks to break the cycle of violence by advancing the characteristics of a new love ethic; a love ethic that captures an essence of righteousness that embraces the personhood of “the other” amidst strife and derision. The type of radical love Jesus describes in verses 44 and 45 requires an evolved interpretation of the Law. In verse 44, Jesus commissions his audience, comprised of his disciples first, and then the larger crowd, to not only love your enemies, but to also pray for those who persecute you. Jesus commends that love be extended to all individuals irrespective of differences in class, gender, race, clan, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. Jesus presents an alternative way of being in community that is simple yet challenging. He calls for his audience to relinquish the steadfast, divisive ethos of their society in order to embrace a distinct way of living in a community that encourages wholeness and values those that are characterized as other.

The power associated with valuing the other increases and also diminishes in light of youth violence in contemporary society. Youth violence happens as a result of an absence of love between youth in diverse communities, and this lack of love is taught to youth by adults in so many arenas. Once youth are taught to classify the “enemy,” this voids the weight of harm enacted towards the other. Furthermore, after the violence has been committed, it cripples the capacity of the community as a whole to propagate love towards one another. In short, violence begets violence and paralyzes the capacity to love.

What is the impetus that is motivating Jesus to command this new love ethic? He confirms that we must embrace this radical form of love as a path towards our rightful position as God’s children (v. 45). We are to love our neighbors *and* our enemies precisely because that is how God loves. Verse 45 states that God makes the “sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” God’s indiscriminate love for God’s creation is our example. As children of God, we are called to emulate the characteristics of the Creator in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Teaching children nonviolence is easier than teaching adults. However, children must be taught love of the other at a young age, and this message must be reiterated again and again in one venue after another, as this message will always have to compete with messages of hate and distrust of the other from media. Specifically for youths, the problem has reached epidemic proportions. This means that we must be much more INTENTIONAL about teaching love to children before they become teens. The Church can be much more proactive in sermons and church programs and in partnerships with parents, schools, and social service agencies in lessening youth violence. Too few in number are the churches that INTENTIONALLY promote nonviolence. A sermon on the subject after another child dies due to gang or drug-related violence is so inadequate. Youth programs that mainly concentrate on teaching Bible verses and abstinence-related behaviors are woefully inadequate. We need to get real and get serious. My clergy peers and I are preparing for ministry with more tools than our foreparents had. However, I wonder if we will we use these tools to promote anti-violence campaigns. Will we connect the socio-cultural factors that increase violence to our sermonizing and our church budgets? Will we advocate with and for those parents who lack the education and information to safeguard and educate their children from the “valleys and shadows of death”?

Our God is a God of action. God did not teach love of the other as some abstract concept and expect the world to catch the vision. Instead God acted. Loving us enough to send us a Savior for our redemption in spite of our constant inhumane acts one to another, God continues to extend mercy to us when our acts and thoughts of violence merit justice. This is our clarion call to give what we have received. So, whether as young adults, parents, pastors, teachers, elders in the village, members of the media, athletes, or blue-collar or white-collar professionals, it’s our time to stand up in our corners of the world and help stop the violence. This is our day. This day we get to decide what will we do with INTENTIONALITY from this point forward to be part of the Jesus army that saves children from being instruments of violence.

### **Celebration**

Jesus uses his radical love ethic as a conduit for transforming communities through reconciliation and love. As Howard Thurman notes, “the concern for reconciliation finds expression in the simple human desire to understand others and to be understood by others.”<sup>3</sup> Even in light of contemporary youth violence, hope still abides in the power of an informed and intentional love ethic. This dynamic of love empowers us to move beyond the division that violence creates towards the power of reconciliation to uplift the ability to see the other through the same lenses of love through which God see us.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** Our enemies; those who persecute us; the sun rising and rain falling;

**Sounds:** The sounds of persecution; gunfire; youth screaming during violent occurrences; the cries of parents as youth die and/or are incarcerated; violence on television and video games; the

sounds of love for those who are our enemies; and the sounds of adults teaching lessons of nonviolence to children; and

**Colors:** The yellow and golden color of the sun; red blood; gang colors; and the colors of children throughout our communities who are victims and agents of violence.

### III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

A. Kash Gaines Poem about Youth Violence—speaks about the psyche behind the use of violence within the youth community.

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-z4b8s051Rg&playnext=1&list=PL6D41EB5AE5CDBE90>

B. Search Youth Uprising—a center for community transformation that incorporates the power of media in a constructive way to combat youth violence in Oakland, California. This is a good resource for developing programs in local communities that help to address the root causes of youth violence. Online location: [www.youthuprising.org](http://www.youthuprising.org).

C. [www.hiddenrage.com](http://www.hiddenrage.com)— a website that provides access to a movie chronicling school bullying and teen suicide. This movie could be helpful considering that bullying in schools is on the rise and has garnered national attention in the media as a result of many high profile cases of bullying that resulted in the suicide and death of youth across the country.

### Notes

1. Center for Disease Control, “Youth Violence: Facts at a Glance, 2010,” <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/YV-DataSheet-a.pdf> accessed 3 March 2011
2. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, “Statistical Briefing Book: Juvenile Offenders.” United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/offenders/overview.html> accessed 3 March 2011
3. Thurman, Howard. Disciplines of the Spirit. Indiana: Friends United Press, 1963. p. 105.
4. For further analysis on the Gospel of Matthew see Long, Thomas. Matthew. Westminster Bible Companion, edited by Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997.