

Matthew 5:38-48

Epiphany 7A

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When we spent Pastor Lauren's internship year outside of Pittsburgh I was fortunate enough to have gotten a job at Best Buy. Getting to wear one of those characteristic blue shirts was an item I got to cross off my bucket list. One of the things I remember most about my time there is also one of the things I can't stand to remember: the same 30 seconds of nature documentary footage that looped over and over again on the TVs.

Every 30 seconds the same meerkat would pop up out of his hole, the same water buffalo would traipse through a stream, and the same eagle would glide through the treetops. At the end the same overly enthusiastic background music would reach its crescendo as the Best Buy yellow tag logo danced across the 50 screens arrayed on the wall. When Christmas time rolled around the manager said they would be running a 30 second clip from A Christmas Story on all those TVs and I almost quit on the spot.

Annoyances aside, the reason they have things displayed on those TVs is to show off the screen size, color, brightness and sound, so that you can be assured the focal point of your new home theater setup is flawless. But another reason is because of an inherent fault in TV technology, one that I am confident you have all seen. It's called image persistence.

Image persistence is what happens when the same image stays on a screen for a long period of time. The little dots of light essentially get stuck in that position. You have probably seen it in doctor's offices or in mall kiosk screens; ghost images of something in the foreground no matter what else is being displayed. It is the result of one image staying

on the screen for a very long time. In the Jiffy Lube just down the street, the ESPN side bar is permanently burned into the TV. If it were to change over to CBS or NBC the morning soaps would be accompanied by traces of the latest NBA scores. Thankfully, the curious meerkat and wandering water buffalo moved just enough that their ghosts never made a permanent mark on the Best Buy showroom floor.

Persistence, then, is one of those situations that we can either look negatively or favorably upon. Persistence when you're trying to sell TVs...bad. But persistence when you're learning to ride a bike...good! The persistence of telemarketers during dinner...bad. But the persistence of doctors and nurses in the ER...good.

Persistence is a trait we might admire in others but maybe not when the object of their persistence is us. Kind of like the persistence of Jesus, when he, with no uncertain terms, outlines what it looks like to be a disciple - especially a disciple whose workplace is in a world where being a disciple is really hard. Suddenly we find that persistence is not so easily packaged into bad or good.

I'm sure over the last few weeks there have been a handful of times when we have been given cause to squirm in our seats a bit.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus repeatedly reframes the law, and we find ourselves increasingly concerned about the increasing demands placed upon us.

You've heard it said that you should not murder, but I say that even being angry at your neighbor carries with it the same liability. You've heard it said that you should not commit adultery, but I say that even looking at another in lust carries with it the same punishment. You've heard it said that justice is equal and measured retaliation, but I say that you should offer the rest of yourself, your other coat, all your resources. You've heard it said that hate has its reasonable place, but I

say to you that hate has no home in my follower's hearts. And the last words we hear from Jesus before the Lenten journey of self-reflection, penitence, confession, and prayer begins, is "be perfect."

Given all that Jesus has preached while standing on the Mount, given all the reframing and reversing and expanding and calling and challenging and shaping he's proclaimed, this feels like a bit of unnerving and difficult Gospel good news to hear. Difficult to hear because we know what it's like out there! We know what it's like in our communities. And, perhaps most critically, we know what it is like in our own hearts.

We want to experience the world and our communities in a way that makes it a lot easier to stick to the old ways of doing things. Anger is easier than kindness. Striking back is easier than turning the other cheek. Keeping our money is easier than giving it away. Hating our enemies is so much easier than loving them especially when it has gotten so much easier to label them as enemies in the first place! It's easier to decide where salt and light should be cast than to be the actual salt and light.

But that is our job. It is our calling. It is who you were created and baptized to be: salt in the unseasonable places, light in the darkest of spaces.

So the call to be perfect is just a call to be who we really are: beloved, chosen, cross-marked children of God. To be water-logged ones who cry out yes, yes to love and no, no to hate. To be daring ones out there proclaiming the Good News and serving the poor and feeding the hungry and tutoring the students and standing up for justice not because we have a self-important duty to bring God out to those neighborhoods...but because that is exactly where God already is, wondering what took us so long.

We are called to be forgiven ones. Persisting in our goals to be salty and bright. Persisting to represent Christ in all we say and do and dream. Persisting to proclaim the immeasurable joy of knowing a God who persists in loving us such that nothing can rip us from that foundation.

Images of God-With-Us Emmanuel are burned into our screens because we left our lives on that channel. And the great thing about image persistence is no matter what you try to do, no matter how often you are turned off and on again, you can never really get rid of it.

My brothers and sisters, your little dots of Christ-light are stuck in that position. And you look perfect. Amen.