

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: The Beat of a Different Drummer

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48

Pastor: Alida Ward

Last Sunday, as many of you will remember, instead of a sermon we had stories, stories and reflections from the mission team who in February carried the support and good wishes of this church all the way to India. My friend Barbara Wales used her time up here to talk about a couple she'd met in India whose work inspired her profoundly. Their story touched me deeply, too. You probably remember: the man is a teacher, a young man, perhaps late 20's, whose life changed some years back, when he discovered that his school's policy was to reject children whose parents were HIV positive. *But where will they go?* he asked. The answer soon became clear: they would go with him. Along with his wife, who had trained to work as an engineer, they opened their home to these children. She left her work. They now care for seventeen kids along with their toddler and newborn, feeding, clothing and sheltering them, finding schools that will take them. They have had to move four times already, because as soon as neighbors discover who these children are, they are hounded from their neighborhood.

When we asked why they chose to do this, they looked at us as if the answer was obvious, and of course it was: they do what they do because they know it is what Christ would have them do.

But their neighbors think they're crazy. Their community thinks they're crazy. I would guess that they have family who think they're crazy. As Barbara said last week, they could have made a comfortable middle class life for themselves. What they're doing is crazy, odd, different and weird. *And ...* what they're doing is faithful. Their odd behavior is what Jesus had in mind for all of us.

We're in the middle of Lent, a season of the year when what we're supposed to do is get a little closer to God, get a whole lot closer to Jesus, and figure out how to get a whole lot closer to being the people Christ wants us to be. And what Vickie read to you just now shows Jesus trying to help us out with that task. Trying to make it clear what kind of people he'd like us to be. And what he says is pretty weird. Pretty different. Pretty odd.

You know how people always say an eye for an eye? says Jesus. That's not how it's going to be with you. Don't return evil for evil. Surprise people. If someone demands to have your cloak, give 'em your shirt too. If someone hits you, turn the other cheek to them. If someone makes you carry something for them a mile, go ahead and carry it another mile. Go the extra mile.

What are you, crazy? said the people listening to him. Someone treats us like dirt, we're supposed to do an extra kindness for them? What the heck is that about? How weird is THAT?

Look, said Jesus, going on ... I'm just trying to tell you that you need to be different from everyone else around you. Everyone around you just likes the people who like them. Everyone around you greets the people who greet them. But where's the challenge in that? Any joker can do that. I'm asking you for something more. Your job is to love everyone. I really mean everyone. I am asking you to try loving like God loves, who, as you may have noticed, loves us all. I am asking you to be like that.

In other words, Jesus was saying, I am asking you to be distinctively different. Because if you're not acting any differently than the people around you, then honestly, what's the point of being my follower? I am asking you to stand out.

That couple that captured Barbara's heart, and mine, stood out. Boy did they stand out. In the midst of a community fearful of AIDS and demonizing its victims, they stood out as a beacon of hope, and a voice for love. This is what it means, Jesus was saying, to follow me. It means to be distinctively different from what is all around you. It means loving those whom others will not love, it means standing out in the crowd, it means having the courage to march to the beat of a different drummer.

And it is true that when Christianity has been at its best, it has been when Christians were not afraid to be utterly different, bravely distinctive, courageously odd. When Christians have moved a community, changed people's hearts, changed a nation, it has been when they were most willing to be not what everyone else would be.

I think of the tragedy that struck the Amish community in Pennsylvania back in 2006 – you remember, when a gunman burst into a little wooden schoolhouse filled with the children of the Amish and opened fire, killing five little girls. As the days unfolded afterward, it became increasingly clear that the Amish response to this terror and tragedy was *odd* to the rest of us, *different*. As food and funds and support began to arrive from all over, the Amish community made sure that the family of the murderer, Charles Roberts, who was himself killed, received as much love and as much kindness as the families of his victims. At the funeral of one of the little girls, an Amish man was heard saying to his grandchild, “Child, remember, we must not think evil of this man.” And at the funeral of Charles Roberts himself, more than half the mourners who arrived

were the Amish, come to surround Roberts' family with their love and with their forgiveness.

The rest of America, watching, didn't know quite what to make of this odd behavior. Some just sneered at their seeming naïveté – *an armed guard at the door of the schoolhouse would have helped them more than their Bible*, I remember one commentator saying. But others knew that we were in the presence of something compelling and true -- *I may think I've got the right theology*, wrote one Christian blogger, *but I don't look nearly as much like Jesus as our Amish friends do right now.*¹

Yes, it was weird the way they reacted. It was different. And it was Christlike.

Years before that, the world was given another example of odd behavior. In South Africa, at the end of apartheid, under the leadership of Desmond Tutu, Afrikaan whites and the South African blacks whom they'd injured were brought together in what were called Truth and Reconciliation hearings – a chance for those who had been oppressed to confront their oppressors. At one hearing, a white policeman by the name of Van de Broek confessed to the commission his role in the shooting of an 18 year old black boy, and eight years later, the killing of that boy's father. When he had finished speaking, the judge, the leader of the commission turned to the woman whose son and husband had been killed, and asked her "what do you want from Mr. van de Broek?"

And she said this, she said: "He took all my family away from me. But I, I still have a lot of love to give. So, I ask this: twice a month, I would like for him to come to my home and spend a day with me, so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know that my forgiveness is real."²

If you love those whom it is easy to love, said Jesus, then what makes you any different from the people around you? But if you love the ones no one expects you to, then you are living the way that God lives toward us. So be different. Be different. None of us are likely to be in situations like the Amish grandfather, or the South African woman, or the couple with a house full of orphaned children. So where is it that we are called to be odd?

How we are called to be different, weird, distinctively Christian? You don't have to look far. We live in a time where we seem to be increasingly hard on each other – whether it's just that we are a nation of anxious people and we're taking it out on each other, whether it's that lightning quick communication has made being unkind that much easier to do, whatever it is, there are chances every single day for us to respond in oddly loving ways to those who are being hard on us, chances every single day for us to respond in weirdly compassionate ways to those who have been unkind. And those oddly loving, weirdly compassionate, bizarrely kind, strangely generous responses are

what Jesus calls us to. If you love the lovable, he said, what do you want, a medal? That's the easy stuff. Do the hard stuff. Be different. Try smiling at the guy who just took your parking spot. Seriously.

I want to end this sermon with another story, and this one comes to you not in my words but in the words of one of our high school seniors, Andrew Scoville. Andrew has been part of our Appalachia Service Project trip the past couple years, and for his college essay this year he shared the story of the family he worked for this year. Now, you have heard many a story from up here about the kindness and welcome of the Appalachian families we serve. You have even met, this year, one of those families. But it doesn't always work out that way. Sometimes the families we work for are less than welcoming, less than warm, less than grateful, for reasons of pride or hurt or bitterness that we can't begin to imagine. And what we do with *that* becomes the true measure of our faith. I want you to listen to what Andrew wrote:

Throughout our week of service, the family we served made it clear they wanted us in and out... There were no friendly meals, no exuberant cultural exchange, not even a pick-up game of Frisbee. While we worked they stayed sequestered in their family room watching television. The week was summed up for me on Friday, when we had just finished all of our work and decided to make one final attempt to connect with the family. As we stood on their front porch separated from them by a screen door, the mother told us to "just go" and shut the door. There was no thank you, no tears of appreciation, no feeling of a newfound home away from home that I had experienced previously on ASP.

As we drove back to our center the car was quiet. No one talked; we all just stared out the window.... I had no idea how my crew would handle our final ASP volunteer meeting, where by tradition we sat in a circle and said a few words about our experience. Most people that night repeated a similar theme over and over, that this week forever changed their life ... but one phrase, one little nugget of wisdom, salvaged the experience for me. It was spoken by a relatively young advisor. As he fought back tears he said, "Each and every person sitting on this porch today has won the birth lottery, we are all lucky beyond our own comprehension." It was at that moment I could finally make sense of everything. I am truly lucky for many reasons, but most importantly for the ability to give myself, my sweat and every part of my being, knowing that I left the world a better place and people around me happier. It is in giving back without a thank you or acknowledgement that I have found true happiness... It dawned on me that the purpose of volunteering in Appalachia, or anywhere, is to help others, not to be thanked.

Loving those who love you? said Jesus. Anyone can do that. I'm asking you for something different.

Andrew got that. The purpose, he said, is to help others – not to be thanked. And it is here that I found true happiness.

Andrew got it. And as embarrassed as he probably is for me to say it – that’s Christlike. So be odd. Be distinctive. Love where no one expects you to love, give where no one expects you to give.

March to the beat of the different drummer, whose name is Jesus. Amen.

¹ read online at <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2006/10/lessons-from-amish-power-of-pacifism.html>

² story found in Philip Yancey’s *Rumors of Another World* – read online at <http://home.clara.net/heureka/books/rumor88.pdf>