

Sermon: "Deal!"

Sunday, February 20, 2011

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights, OH

Epiphany VII Year A: Matthew 5:38-48

How many of you know who Sue Sylvester is?

Sue Sylvester is the cheerleading coach on the award winning, hit television show "Glee."

Glee's plot revolves around the lives and antics of the student glee club at William McKinley High School in Lima, Ohio. Glee's conductor and the school Spanish teacher is Will Schuster, aka Mr. Schu. Will is a passionate man who labors tirelessly to turn the Glee Club into a first class competitive ensemble.

Sue Sylvester is Will's nemesis. She hates the Glee Club –actually she hates just about everything - and virtually each episode of Glee has Sue plotting some despicable, dastardly deed against Glee and Mr. Schu.

In this past Tuesday's episode of the show Sue becomes distraught after her cheerleading squad, called the Cheerios, were given bad PR by none other than Katie Couric herself, over a cheesy cheerleading stunt they pulled.

Sue pretends to enter a deep depression over this news report. Some of her colleagues try to console and help her. Sue of course is feigning her depression; yet one more dastardly deed. When Mr. Schu finds out she is yanking everyone's chain he tells her, "Sue, you are nasty, manipulative and petty," which pretty much sums up Sue's personality in a nutshell.

Later in the same episode Sue nurtures a conflict between Glee's two divas with the intent of breaking up the Club. Vying for the spot of better diva, the two girls sing a competitive duet, trying to out diva one another. But instead of being competitive their voices end up harmoniously complementing each other and they sing fabulously. As the two girls hug each other joyfully at the songs conclusion to rousing applause from their peers, Sue shouts out, "hey where's the hate?"

Sue thrives on hate. And retribution. And dissent. And triangulation. And deceit. And conflict.

Now I ask those of you who are fans of Glee, can any of you think of anyone meaner or nastier, more ill tempered, devious and cantankerous than Sue Sylvester? That woman takes bubbles out of champagne for fun. Sue is everyone's idea of what an enemy is like.

So imagine yourself as one of the teachers at McKinley High or a student member of Glee: how many of you would willingly offer your other cheek to Sue after she had figuratively smacked you hard on the first cheek? And trust me she will smack you hard. Wouldn't your natural response be to strike back, to plot revenge, to get even? Wouldn't you be yearning to have Sue get her comeuppance? Plotting to get that proverbial eye for an eye actually seems like a delicious endeavor when it comes to Sue? "Jesus said, 'You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'" (Matt. 5:38-39)

Really? To say that Christians struggle with this seemingly impossible command from Jesus to be passive in the face of those who harm us, physically, emotionally, or spiritually would be an understatement.

It's a pretty tall order for us to take seriously, not the least because it is counter-intuitive to our human nature. Even taller because it is difficult for us to see - at least on the surface of things - just what purpose there is to Jesus' command for us to do this. Is Jesus asking us to be doormats for the evildoers in our lives? And our response is, "Good luck with that. No way I am letting that bully Sue Sylvester walk all over me. "What about my dignity, my integrity, my pride, my well-being, my honor?"

Mr. Schu struggles with this very issue about how to respond to Sue's meanness. He's tried just every approach with her from being her doormat to plotting revenge. He's done everything that is except turn the other cheek, until this week. It's as if Will has read Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount and heard Jesus command. Or maybe he's read Paul's letter to the Romans where it says "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Now that thought holds out certainly possibilities in our dealing with nasty people! A taste of venegence in that, isn't there? But that's another sermon. This past week Will tried the turn the other cheek approach with Sue. Now for clarification, turning the other cheek isn't calling us to a passive response by allowing our enemy to continue to abuse us. It is a proactive response to hateful behavior by engaging it, countering it with loving behavior.

Will does this by inviting Sue to a pediatric cancer ward at a local hospital where he sings songs once a month with the children. Sue resists his invitation, but Will finally convinces her to go. "Go there with me, I think it will be good for you," he tells her. As they enter the hospital, Sue, true to form, mutters, "I hate hospitals, that's why I voted for the death panels."

Entering the ward children enthusiastically run up to Will to greet and hug him. Most have bandanas on their heads to hide their hair loss from the chemo. Many look frail from their illness. But children have this amazing capacity to find great joy even in the midst of pain and difficult situations.

Children still can find joy and wonder in God's creation – as we will pray today when we baptize baby Rowan Philip – because they have not become jaded and cynical. It is that sense of wonder and innocence which we desire to re-obtain for ourselves who have been damaged by the harshness of the world. And that can only occur through love. Which is why Will takes Sue to the pediatric cancer ward, to allow Sue to re-obtain her sense of joy and wonder of life through love.

Sue is clearly discomforted with the kids when she enters the ward, yet she is also curious about them. It's as if she has entered the Narnia wardrobe and passed from one world into another. She has this amazing vulnerable look about her as she stands among these children.

Will gets all the kids to sit in a circle. Sue has a young girl in a pink bathrobe sitting on her lap. Will brings out his ukulele and they begin to sing "This Little Light of Mine." The girl in Sue's lap is singing joyfully. In one shot she looks up at Sue and gives her a hug. Sue's face softens. It becomes tender and we can imagine tears welling up as she sings, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine . . ."

As they finish the song Sue looks at Will and says, "I'll never forgive you for this." With a broad smile on his face Will looks at Sue and says, "Deal!"

This morning we prayed in our opening Collect, "O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing." Nothing. That's the whole point of Jesus' command to not lash back at those who harm us. In fact it is the whole of point of Jesus, his ministry and his life.

It is in those very moments of letting go of the desire to exact retribution against those who have harmed us, instead loving them despite their ugliness, that we find our worth as followers of Jesus, as children of God. We are not being doormats or wimps when we do this. In fact the reality is we will need to muster up all our strength, courage and desire to forgive to achieve this behavior. Being a true follower of Jesus is not for the feint of heart.

The love expressed in those moments when we do this becomes the portal for authentic transformation for ourselves, for our enemies and for the world. Entering that portal we

begin to find our self worth and our light shines brilliantly for others to see and the reign of God comes that much closer to being a reality.

So I dare us to incarnate Jesus' command to turn the other cheek toward our enemies the next time we are harmed, however that may be. I dare us to proactively offer them the cheek of love. In so doing I want us to be touched, moved, and ultimately transformed by those moments that the only response left for us is to turn to God and say, "I will never forgive you for this."

I want us to do this so we can hear God's voice in our hearts as God replies, "Deal!"

Amen.