Can You Imagine a Different World?

Rich Nathan
11/15/1016
Ethos Church
Matthew 5:38-48

We've just been through the most expensive midterm elections in American history. Nearly $12 billion was spent by the political campaigns. It was also, according to many historians, among the ugliest, meanest, most vulgar, most negative campaigns in history.

Some of the ads were downright disgusting. And almost none of the ads from any side inspire us to imagine a better future for us or for our children. The vast majority of the ads were negative. What we witnessed over the last few months was politics as blood sport - politics as a no-holds-barred cage fight without referees. Politicians just keep going lower and lower.

.

Many of the candidates want us to become as cynical and jaded as they are, so that we just throw up our hands in total exhaustion and think, “What's the point? I'm just going to check out. Everything is awful. Nothing will ever change. Things are going to remain as they've always been, and it doesn't matter who is in power. We're just going to repeat the same cycle over and over and over again.” We've gotten to a point where it's easy to believe that people in power just want to make us as cynical as possible. But every once in a while, someone comes along and says, “I've allowed myself to imagine a different world. And I'm inviting you to join me.” I think of Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I have a dream speech”

delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. Even if you weren't born so long ago, if you're old enough to have gone to school, I'm sure you've heard this speech. And you know the famous words:

SLIDE #1 **“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of slave owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood.” [Martin Luther King Jr.]**

When Billy Graham heard this, he said, “Not until Jesus returns will this happen,” but just a few weeks ago, Georgia elected a black governor for the first time in its history. Georgia, a former slave state, now has a black governor and two senators, one of whom is black, and the other is Jewish. King went on.

SLIDE #2 **I have a dream that one day, even in the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. [Martin Luther King Jr.]**

Mississippi looks likely to elect its first black senator since reconstruction. King then said,

SLIDE # 3 **I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. [Martin Luther King Jr.]**

For the first time in American history, we now have six black governors serving at the same time period. Before this current election, only three black men had ever been elected as governor of any state in the United States. Now, King's dream that one day, people would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character is being fulfilled in state houses around the country.

Every so often, someone comes along and invites us to imagine a different world than the world we currently live in. I think of Bobby Kennedy's campaign for President. I am not talking about the current Health and Human Services director, but I'm thinking of his father. When Bobby Kennedy closed out many of his campaign speeches in 1968, he used to quote a line from the playwright George Bernard Shaw. And this is what Kennedy said,

SLIDE # 4 **Some people see things as they are and say, "Why?" I dream things that never were and say, "Why not?"**

One of my all time favorite songs became an anthem of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. It's by one of my favorite singers who I can listen to all day, Sam Cooke. It's called "A Change is Gonna Come," and it goes this way:

SLIDE #5 **I was born by the river in a little tent,**

Oh, and just like the river, I've been running ever since.

It's been a long time, a long time coming,

But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes, it will. [Sam Cooke]

In the Sermon on the Mount - a series that you've been doing in this church - Jesus invites us to dream with him - to believe that because he entered the world, and the kingdom of God is here in part, a change is gonna come. Oh, yes, it will! In essence, Jesus asked us throughout the Sermon on the Mount one searching question, which I'm going to explore with you today:

SLIDE # 6 **<u>Can you imagine a different world?</u>**

That's the title of today's message. Can you imagine a different world? Let's pray.

SLIDE # 7 **38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'**
39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right
cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and
take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one
mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn
away from the one who wants to borrow from you. [Matthew 38-42, NIV]

SLIDE #8 **[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44] But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. [46] If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? [47] And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? [48] Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. [Matthew 5:43-48, NIV]**

Now if you were outlining this talk, I'm going to try to answer this question - can you imagine a different world:

SLIDE #9

- **Historically**
- **Biblically**
- **Practically**

We're going to consider this question historically, then biblically, then practically.

Historically, most people cannot imagine a different world. Most people throughout history have never encountered the love of Jesus. They've never

personally experienced the forgiveness of their sins. They don't know what “Sermon on the Mount Christianity” might be like.

Most people in the world simply live with recycled revenge. All they can imagine is a world of payback and retribution. Most people, and even many of us, can't imagine a world where you don't seek to get even and settle the score. We tend to think that our hatred of our enemies is justified, because we can point to all the things they've done wrong. In the worlds of church, or politics, or military might, or work, we believe that if we were in charge and they were defeated, everything would be different.

Of course, all history tells a different story. Revenge, getting even, just fuels the endless cycle of retribution. The new boss is just the same as the old boss. Think back to 9/11. It's a testimony to the lie of revenge. On that day, 19 men filled with hate and armed with box cutters, tried to change the world. They believed that hate was more powerful than love. And what did they do? They just added another chapter to the long line of recycled vengeance and retribution and death.

Historically, most people and most of us believe that the only way forward is to get back at people. But every once in a while, there are people who have been so radically impacted by the coming of the kingdom of God and the message of Jesus that they imagine the possibility of a different world. I want to tell you a few of their stories.

During the 18th century, England went through enormous economic and social change. Industrialization and the growth of cities were accompanied by grinding poverty and widespread drunkenness. Church was almost completely off limits to working class people. In the early 1700s, the so-called “gin craze” took hold of the poorest people in London. Not only did men and women stumble down the street drunk most of the time, but mothers fed gin to their infants to keep them quiet, and many infants grew up blind. Instead of welfare or help for the poor, the government punished people for the crime of poverty, and confined them to the workhouse.

As I said, the working class never went to church, and even if they wanted to, they would be shunned by regular church attenders because of their filthy clothes and their smell. Personal health and cleanliness in Wesley's day were unattainable for working people. Most homes had no running water, and soap wasn't in common use. Clothing was expensive, and many of the poor wore rags full of lice. Young boys and girls were apprenticed to masters where they had to work six days a week from dawn to dusk. Child labor was common.

But John Wesley imagined a different world. He imagined a world in which ordinary working people could be radically converted - where children didn't work in mines, but went to school. He believed that Christianity could not only transform a person's beliefs, but their habits, their treatment of the poor, even

their habits of cleanliness. It was Wesley who popularized the saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

Wesley established schools. He encouraged education; he promoted medical care. He opposed slavery; he visited prisons; he organized charitable assistance. Working people began going to church. And then Wesley set up small groups, thousands of them across Great Britain. People found fellowship; they grew in holiness and in their knowledge of Jesus and the scriptures. And England was radically changed.

And then, in the late 18th century, beginning of the 19th century, Britain was the world's greatest commercial and imperial power, but its wealth was tied to the buying and selling of enslaved Africans. It seemed like nothing could change the slave trade. It was legally protected, and England's economic position depended on slaves. British merchants, plantation owners, politicians, banks, everyone had an economic interest in keeping slavery going. But a man named William Wilberforce imagined a different world. He devoted nearly 20 years to fighting in Parliament to abolish the slave trade. It was finally abolished in 1807, but then, for the next 26 years, he worked tirelessly year after year to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire. Finally, in 1833, Parliament voted to abolish slavery. Just three days later, Wilberforce died.

I could mention William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, who imagined a different world for the wretchedly poor throughout England or Elizabeth Fry who imagined a different world for female prison inmates in the 19th century or George Muller who imagined a world where orphaned children are treated as precious to the Lord rather than as burdens to be pushed aside.

Over and over again, when things seem absolutely hopeless, God reaches out and touches a man or woman and, by grace, enables them to imagine a different world. And I wonder, if sitting in this congregation today, there aren't some people who might be called by God and graced by God to imagine a world different from the world we live in right now. Will you ask God to fill you with his imagination for this world? Can you imagine a different world in Central Ohio or our city? Can you imagine a different future for you or your children? Many people have.

Biblically, there have always been men and women who could imagine a different world. In the Bible, the Lord, in both the Old and New Testament, invites ordinary people to imagine a different world. Of course, many cannot. I think of Sarah and Abraham, who both laughed at the promise of a child, because they both believed that their age and barrenness define what's possible. But God had to speak and say, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” And what was possible arrived in a baby boy named Isaac, whose name literally means “he laughs.” God replaced Sarah's unbelieving laugh with a laugh of joy.

In the days of Ezekiel, people couldn't imagine a different world. In Ezekiel 37, Israel said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is gone.” The exile made the hope of restoration and return to the promised land unimaginable. So God asked Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” He's calling Ezekiel to believe for a different world. And then, God shows him the possibility of a different world by breathing into the bones and resurrecting the dead.

I think of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They're talking to Jesus, but they can't imagine that he's alive. They say to him, “We had hoped that he (namely Jesus) was the one to redeem Israel.” Their imagination of the Messiah had no room for a crucified king, and certainly no room for a risen Lord. But the risen Lord opens their eyes and causes their hearts to burn as he interprets the scripture for them and shows them that a new world, the world of the kingdom of God, is possible, and it has come.

The Bible speaks about others who could imagine a different world. I think of a man in the book of Genesis that was a dreamer. His name was Joseph. And when he was 17 years old, his brothers sold him into slavery. For the next 13 years, he lived the life of a slave in Egypt. At times, he rose. At times, he found favor in the eyes of his superior, and he experienced incredible success, but then he was knocked down again and again and suffered deep injustice.

Finally, when he was at his lowest point, when it seemed like there was no hope, things suddenly changed. God reversed his fortunes and he was exalted by Pharaoh to rule over the whole of Egypt. But Joseph's story doesn't end there. because it's the story of a creation of a whole new world. Nine years after he was released from prison, the tables were turned. Joseph's brothers come to him, on the verge of starvation, and Joseph has the opportunity to get revenge. It's payback time. He can get even. Joseph could have his brothers sold into slavery just as he was sold into slavery. He could have continued the cycle of violence and revenge. But God touched Joseph's life with grace. And Joseph didn't do what most of us do in a situation like that. Most of us want to get even. But instead, Joseph forgave his brothers. And he opened up the possibility of a new future for the nation of Israel.

Even after he forgave them, his brothers could not imagine a world ruled by forgiveness. When Joseph's father died, Joseph's brothers feared. They said, “Joseph will now pay us back for all the wrong we did to him,” because Joseph's brothers lived in a world of payback and revenge. A world where if you have power, you crush people who are weaker and who have hurt you in the past. And in a world of paybacks, just like our world today, whoever gets back in power, exacts their revenge. They try to settle the score, but the score is never settled because the tables always turn. Again, Joseph is touched by grace. He imagines a different world. And instead of exacting revenge, he says, “Am I in the place of God?” In other words, “If there's going to be any judgment ever, I've left that in

the hands of God. As for me, I release you. In fact, I will do you good instead of evil."

So, historically, we see that there are some people who have been so impacted by God's kingdom, that they can imagine a different world. Biblically, we also see that there are people who have been so impacted by God's kingdom that they can imagine a different world. But let's consider this passage practically.

The verses that we read earlier are some of the most challenging verses for Christians to apply. At least at first glance, maybe at second glance, they seem so unrealistic that we Christians often skip them, or we at least reinterpret them so that they don't really apply to us and the conflicts we are in. Maybe these verses about going the second mile and giving to everyone who asks are for the millennium - you know, when Jesus returns, but they're not for life today in our fallen world. Maybe Jesus is speaking hyperbolically. You know, he does that. He tells people to cut off their hand and gouge out their eye. Of course, he doesn't mean that literally. Maybe this business of loving your enemies, and praying for people who persecute you, and turning the other cheek. Maybe it's all hyperbole, or maybe, maybe these verses are for religious professionals like monks, or pastors. But they're not for ordinary lay people.

The problem is Jesus is speaking to all of his disciples. And he's talking about life in this world.

Well, maybe he wants us to spiritualize these verses. He's not asking for concrete actions of actually giving to people who ask us. Maybe he means, by turning the other cheek, that we should, in all situations, try to maintain inner peace. Maybe giving your cloak means being generous in your spirit. Maybe, "be perfect" means "try your best." And maybe when he's talking about enemies, he means people who are annoying - people who disagree with us politically. Or, to use Christian language, maybe he's talking about how we need to love what used to be called the EGRs in the church - "extra grace required" people. If we were in the South and somebody bothered us, we would just say, "Well, bless your heart," which means "Jesus loves you, but I sure don't." Maybe he means we should just say, "Well, bless your heart," to our enemies.

What should we do when we read a passage that just seems so far beyond us? Do we spiritualize it? Do we push it off to the millennium? Do we assign it to religious professionals? Practically, what do you do with this text? Let me start negatively and mention a couple of things, and then we will finish positively with some practical counsel of how we can actually put these texts into practice.

When you read a text like this one in the Bible, never say this is utterly impossible - this passage is completely unrealistic - this commandment cannot be done. Because, especially as we read the Sermon on the Mount, we need to remember who actually said these words. These words were said by Jesus, not

by some armchair philosopher, somebody in the Harvard faculty lounge with expensive Scotch sitting on their knees, talking about their ideas of social improvement. The Sermon on the Mount was spoken by Jesus.

What do we know about Jesus? Well, we know, first of all, that Jesus actually lived what he taught. He experienced the insulting slap with the back of the hand. He had police officers spit on him and then blindfold him and then punch him in the face. He had Roman soldiers push thorns into his scalp and clothe him in the imperial purple robe, and then strike him repeatedly over the head with a staff. They took off the robe, and beat him until his back was shredded. After that, they made him carry a heavy crossbeam, put spikes through his hands and his feet, and hanged him there naked while they jeered at him as the crowds laughed. But from that cross, as he gasped for breath, Jesus forgave his enemies. When we read these words that we are to love our enemies, we always have to remember who spoke them. These words were spoken by a man who actually loved his enemies, including us. Jesus lived the life that he invites us to live - a life free from bitterness, free from fantasies of revenge, free from using his power to get even with those who abused him.

You see, it's one thing to have someone put their arm around you after you've lost your child and say, “There's hope for you still. You'll get through this.” It's quite another thing to have a father or mother who's lost their own child put their

arm around you and say, “I understand. But I know you will get through this. There's hope for you.”

The Bible calls us to worship the Lord at all times, to have his praise continually on our lips. I used to read that and think, “That's unrealistic. Especially when your life is shattered, no one could be expected to worship the Lord at all times and have his praise be continually on our lips…” until I attended the funeral of a three and a half year-old boy whose parents had waited to get pregnant for a decade. This little boy was the joy of his daddy. Never has a little boy been so loved as John Richard Pittluck was by his father, Lance. But one night, the most awful thing happened. The little boy seemed to have the flu. Lance stayed up with him to make sure he was okay. And all of a sudden, Lance's beloved son, John, tipped over on the bed. He looked odd, and when Lance tried to wake him up, to his horror, he wouldn't awaken.

The squad came, and Little John was dead. A virus somehow jumped to his heart and killed that little boy. I attended the funeral, and everyone there was in tears. My friend Lance sat in the front row, and during one of the worship songs, I saw him lift up his head, and then he stood up, and he raised his hands, and he made a decision that “I will worship the Lord at all times. His praise will continually be in my mouth.” And I thought, “OK, now I know it's possible in the darkest times, to worship the Lord.”

Never say these words about turning the other cheek or loving your enemy are unrealistic - the world doesn't work that way. Never say, especially in the hearing of people who actually put them into practice, that these words cannot be done. Let me tell you a story. There's a book called

SLIDE #10 **Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher**

and it opens with these words, “Amish. School. Shooting. Never did we imagine these words would appear together. But the unimaginable turned real on October 2, 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his rage into an Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Five schoolgirls died that day, and five others were seriously wounded. He turned a tranquil schoolhouse into a house of horror.”

The book goes on to tell us that Roberts was a bitter man. Nine years earlier, his firstborn child, a daughter, died 20 minutes after birth. Charles and his wife, Amy, grieved. Charles could have had a good life, with his loving wife and their three other children, but he let the bitterness over his child's death turn him into a monster. He became a ticking time bomb. In a suicide note, he confessed to sexually abusing two young relatives. This combination of shame and rage became like a poison in his soul. He was angry with God, he was angry with his wife. He was angry with his life. And in his mind, somebody had to pay, so he

believed the devil's lie, that the way to change the world was to pay people back. So he went into a schoolhouse in the Amish community where he lived, and he exacted his revenge. According to the survivors, Robert said, “I'm angry with God, and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even with him.”

Charles Roberts shot 10 girls in the head. Five died, and five survived. And then he killed himself. His wife, Amy, at the time, was actually at a Bible study, held by a Moms in Touch group at her Presbyterian church. Within hours of the killing, some men from the Amish community went to Amy Roberts' house, not to pay her back, not to exact revenge, but they brought gifts of food to Amy and her children, and they offered forgiveness. They told her that they bore no animosity to her and they promised to help in the future. Five days later, when the Roberts family gathered to bury the gunmen, half of the mourners there were from the Amish community. They hugged Amy. They again offered forgiveness. Never say that forgiveness is impossible! Never say loving your enemies is impossible!

You know, church leaders across America are trying to strategize about how to reach people for Christ - what will break through the online insanity and the cynicism and continual reports of abuse and corruption that people hear from churches.I think to myself, what will break through? What will penetrate the darkness that's covering our country right now? And it occurs to me there are three things that would break through: certainly acts of mercy, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, visiting the sick, welcoming the immigrant. The world takes

notice of acts of mercy. Certainly, signs and wonders might break through. The power of the Holy Spirit, healing the sick, a genuine experience of God, that would break through. But, you know, I think we church leaders, we often forget what history has taught us - that the world sits up and takes notice whenever a church or an individual practices radical forgiveness - whenever church or an individual stops playing the devil's game of recycled revenge and payback and retribution. Whenever somebody in a moment of grief, or real hurt, and a broken heart walks out the way of Jesus, and forgives, I tell you, people, the world sits up and takes notice. Because no one can imagine a world like that.

There is one more negative thing that you should never say, if you want to imagine a different world. The first is that these words of Jesus are unrealistic. They're not. Many, many people throughout history, who are followers of Jesus, have broken the cycle of revenge and retribution. The second thing is this: Never, ever say that these words of Jesus cause injustice, that they'll lead abused wives to continue to be punching bags, or abused church members to continue to be silenced by pastors and elders.

Whenever your reading of the Bible contradicts your deepest moral intuitions, one of two things is the case. Either your moral intuitions have not been shaped by the Word of God, or you or the person who is teaching is misreading the Bible. And while we haven't the time to explore this deeply, I would point you to the writings of Christopher Wright, a great Old Testament scholar, and he simply says

this: “Whenever we encounter a command in the Bible, we always ought to ask the question, whose interest is being served by this command?”

Whose interest is being served by the commands of scripture? And the answer is always going to be the same: the weak, the victimized, the oppressed. God stands on the side of the abused. Always. In theological language, “God has a preferential option for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant.” His heart goes out to the poor. What he is doing in these commands is he's giving agency back to the poor, to the oppressed. What he's saying is this: ”Don't respond in kind to people who mistreat you. Don't be an echo. Don’t let other people control your responses. Don't seek revenge.”

Let's remember who Jesus was talking to in the Sermon on the Mount. He was talking to people who were pushed around, shoved aside, walked over. He's talking to the bullied, the battered, the broken. He's talking to the overpowered, the overlooked, and the overwhelmed. These were people who were always bullied into submission, coerced into compliance, exploited for someone else's advantage.

Jesus was talking to people the powerful talked over, and walked over, and pushed over. How do you empower people who feel like that? Jesus gives the powerless dignity. He gives them agency. He says, “You can make choices.” Somebody is pushing you to give? Don't let them coerce you. Give freely.

Someone wants to dishonor you by slapping you with the back of their hand? There's no police to help you. You become a person of honor and dignity, you turn your face, and you shame them by saying, “I'm your equal. You're not bullying me.” In these verses, Jesus is giving agency and dignity to people who have no power. In other words, you can choose to be the kind of person you want to be - you can choose to become bitter, controlled by what others do to you and have done to you, or by the grace of God, you can choose to be free, to be alive, to create a different future for yourself.

Now, positively, quickly, how can we bring into reality the world Jesus causes us to imagine in the Sermon on the Mount? How do we do that? Jesus does not ask us to feel differently or to feel warmly towards those who have hurt us. John Stott mentions three things we can do.

Number one, Jesus says, “Pray.” Pray for those who persecute you. Pray. If you really try to pray for somebody who has hurt you, it will surface all of your anger, all of your desire for revenge, all of your fantasies of getting even. When you pray, you have an opportunity to give over your grief regarding what happened, your feelings of powerlessness, your humiliation, your shame. You desire to strike back, but in prayer, you can hand all of that over to God. Ask God to cleanse you in prayer. You can pray that your enemy would repent, that they would turn, that they would not go to the judgment seat unforgiven. But if they

refuse to repent, pray that God would judge them. We can love our enemies by praying for them.

Second, we can love our enemies by doing good for them. Jesus says, In Luke 6:27, “Do good to those who hate you.” What does doing good look like? Sometimes it's extending a hand when that person needs mercy. Sometimes it's helping them out of a jam. Sometimes, it actually means giving them financial help. Do good to your enemy.

And finally, we can love our enemies by changing how we speak about them. In Luke 6:28, “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” We can choose to stop speaking about them. We can choose to stop belittling them or recruiting others into our anger. We can choose to speak to God about our anger rather than to other people.

The words of Jesus in the text that we read today is some of the most difficult teaching that we encounter anywhere in the Bible. Jesus is inviting you and me through this incredibly challenging teaching, to imagine a different world - to imagine yourself not being controlled by the devil's lie of revenge and retribution. But instead, to believe that the kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Can You Imagine a Better World?

Rich Nathan
11/15/2026
Ethos Church
Matthew 5:38-48

I.