

Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:38-48

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A crowd showed up at the front door of the Feltner house and they were ready for a lynching. Thad Coulter had shot and killed Ben Feltner, a man loved and respected in the town of Port William, Kentucky. Even though Thad Coulter rode his mule to Hargrave, the next town up the river, and turned himself in to the sheriff at the county courthouse, the angry crowd did not want to wait for a judge and jury to decide things. They had a rope with them, and they had come to get the blessing of the Feltner family to avenge Ben Feltner's blood.

Mat Feltner, Ben's son, came to the porch. He heard voices from the crowd calling for Thad Coulter, the murderer, to be hanged. He saw the rope. He listened as old Doc Starns spoke the words everyone was feeling, "Mat, we're here as your daddy's friends. We've got word that Thad Coulter's locked up in the jail at Hargrave. We want you to know that we don't like what he did." As voices shouted in agreement Doc continued, "We think it's our business, and we propose to make it our business. It's only up to you to say the word, and we'll ride down there tonight and put justice beyond question. We have a rope." In the now-silent crowd someone held up a coil of rope, a noose already tied.

What Mat Feltner said to that rope-wielding mob has a lot to do with the words Jesus said about turning the other cheek and loving your enemies. In a calm voice full of resolve, a voice that would not yield, Mat said, "No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do it." Getting to the place where he could say to the crowd, "I ask you not to do it," was no easy journey for Mat Feltner. And he did not arrive at that place by himself.

Here is how the murder took place. Strange as it sounds, Thad Coulter said Ben Feltner was his best friend. But Thad Coulter was not thinking straight when he shot and killed Ben Feltner. Thad had just lost his farm. This story is set way back in 1912, and a man's farm in those Kentucky hills was everything. Thad had lost his farm, he felt like a failure, he got drunk, and then he reached out to the only man he considered friend enough to spill his sorrow. That man was Ben Feltner. Ben listened as Thad ranted and raved in his drunken stupor, and when he finally knew what Thad needed was to sober up, Ben told him to go home and come back when he could think straight.

Thad took that as rejection. He said to himself how high and mighty Ben Feltner was, what with him owning his farm. He imagined Ben Feltner was looking down on him, treating him as less than a man, and certainly not like a friend. Thad Coulter went home angry. Ben Feltner waited until Thad Coulter had left, and then he went right into town, right into Port William, and looked for some of Thad Coulter's kin. Ben aimed at putting everyone's mind together and seeing if there wasn't some way they could help Thad from losing his farm.

But Thad had gone home angry. Thad had gone home offended. Thad had gone home convinced that the one person he could get some measure of satisfaction from harming was the man he thought had harmed him, Ben Feltner. So Thad took his gun into town and set out to find Ben Feltner. He found Ben talking to Thad's own cousin Dave, talking about how to help Thad in his trouble. But Thad didn't hear the conversation. He just saw Ben and he felt anger and he remembered the feeling of rejection. With a pull of the trigger a bullet lodged in Ben Feltner's forehead. He fell to the ground. Thad put his pistol in his pocket and hopped on his mule. He came into town an angry man. He rode away a murderer.

The story could have ended with murder. It could even have ended with revenge. You see, Mat Feltner was in town when his dad Ben got shot by Thad Coulter. Mat was at the blacksmith's shop just having small talk with the other men waiting to get their horses worked on when all the men heard a single gunshot. Mat hurried with the others and saw a crowd gathered around a body. When the crowd made way for him he realized the dead body concerned him. The crowd saw Mat and shouted, "Let him through! Let him through!" He saw his pa lying dead on the ground and folks heard him say, "Oh!" That little word sounded hollow and empty and full of loss.

Now we already know how one man handled his anger. Thad Coulter talked himself into a rage and shot and killed his friend. When Mat realized his dad had been shot and killed, when he found out it was Thad Coulter, the stage was set to watch how another man would handle his anger. And Mat was filled with anger. He got up from the ground where he was kneeling by his dead father and he asked where Thad had gone. He got up and headed after Thad. Mat was a man filled with rage and set on vengeance.

But something happened to change things. Someone happened. His name was Jack Beechum. Jack was Mat's uncle. He too heard the gunfire. He too heard that Ben Feltner had been killed. He too knew Thad Coulter had done it. And he saw Mat Feltner stand up and set out with a desire for vengeance burning in his soul. In fact Mat was running in his anger. Jack saw him and he headed right toward him and hit him with the full force of his body. Jack came at Mat from the side and hit him and wrapped his arms around him and held on with all his strength.

They struggled against one another for a long time. Mat twisted and strained with fury, uttering cries that could have been either grunts or sobs. They wrestled there, heaving and staggering and Jack felt like his arms would pull apart. The story goes that Jack felt something go out of him that day. And what went out of Jack came into Mat. In the embrace of his uncle Mat became a stronger man than he had been. A strength came into him that held his grief and his anger as Jack had held him. And Jack could feel the strength come into Mat. Finally Mat ceased to strive, and Jack let go his hold. They stood there panting and sweating for several minutes. Finally Mat became aware that Jack was waiting on him. Mat looked up; he met Jack's gaze. He said, "Pa's dead. Thad Coulter has shot him." Then Mat said, "I'll go tell Ma. You bring Pa, but give me a little time."

That is how Mat Feltner got to his parent's house. Jack did bring Ben Feltner's dead body home, and they set the body up in the living room, like they used to do in the old days. People started bringing food over. Della Budge came bearing an iced cake on a stand like a lighted lamp. She saw Jack, still standing real close, keeping an eye on Mat, not sure if that anger and desire for vengeance was completely gone.

Miss Della had been Jack's Sunday school teacher years ago. She was the only one who still called him Jackie. "Well, Jackie", she said, lifting her spectacles on her nose, "poor Ben has met his time."

"Yes mam," Jack said. "One of them things."

"When your time comes you must go, by the hand of man or the stroke of God."

"Yes, Mam," Jack said.

"It'll come by surprise. It's a time appointed, but we'll not be notified."

Jack said he knew it. And he did know it.

"So we must always be ready," she said. "Pray without ceasing."

"Yes, mam." And Jack stepped ahead of her to help Miss Della out the door and down the porch steps.

"Why, thank you, Jackie," she said as she set foot at last on the walk.

Pray without ceasing. That is the title of this story. It is a fictional story written by Wendell Berry. Pray without ceasing. You never know when your time will come. You never know when the economy will go sideways and you might lose something precious like your farm. You never know when something will come between you and a good friend. You never know when anger will come knocking at your door. You never know when a loved one will be hurt by someone and you will rise up and have the burning desire to get revenge. You never know when death will come. We never know about any of these things. We are never notified in advance. They come as a surprise. So we must always be ready. We must pray without ceasing.

So Mat Feltner was there on the porch of his daddy's house when the angry mob came with a rope and asked Mat to bless their vengeance. But something had come into Mat. Someone had come into Mat. Something bigger than himself was present in his life. The power to forgive was present. The power to turn the other cheek. The power to love Thad Coulter, who for every known reason was his enemy. The crowd held up the rope and said it's only up to you and we'll take justice into our own hands. And Mat said, "No, gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do it."

It's amazing what comes out of something like forgiveness. This story, *Pray Without Ceasing* is told from the perspective of Mat Feltner's grandson, Andy Catlett. The story is told some 80 years after the day when Ben Feltner was shot and killed. From a distance way down the road, Andy Catlett can look back and see what came out of his grandpa Mat Feltner being a forgiving man, a man who turned the other cheek. At one point in the story Mat's wife is remembering him standing on the porch that night, weighing vengeance and forgiveness and choosing the path of grace. She says, "I can see him yet (standing on that porch). I wish you could have seen him." There is a real sense that Andy does see him. Through the story he sees his grandpa Mat Feltner as a big man, capable of big forgiveness.

You see, Andy knew that his grandpa Mat Feltner had carried on his friendship with the Coulter family, with Thad's widow and their children. Mat Feltner carried on a friendship with one of Thad Coulter's first cousins, a man named Marce Catlett. In fact, Marce Catlett was Andy's grandfather on his mother's side. And when Marce Catlett's son asked Mat Feltner if he could marry Mat's daughter Bess, the Catlett's were made welcome. It was Bess who became Andy's mom.

Andy Catlett concludes the story with this reflection.

“Though Coulters still abound in Port William, no Feltner of the name is left. But the Feltner line continues, joined to the Coulter line, in me, and I am here. I am blood kin to both sides of that moment when Ben Feltner turned to face Thad Coulter in the road and Thad pulled the trigger. The two families, sundered in the ruin of a friendship, were united again first in new friendship and then in marriage. My grandfather made a peace here that has joined many who would otherwise have been divided. I am the child of his forgiveness.”¹

Revelation 21 gives us a compelling vision of what life in heaven will be like.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with his children, and he will live with them...He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Sometimes it seems so far away, that promise of no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Sometimes we wonder if we will ever get there.

And then Jesus shows up. He shows up in a world where there are murders and betrayals and sufferings and bankruptcies and ruin and sickness and drunkenness and anger and pain. He shows up in the embrace of a friend who holds us up until we can hold ourselves. He shows up in a scene of bedlam where a crowd is set on vengeance and the symbol they hold is a rope. He shows up when a man like Mat Feltner says, “I’d ask you not to do it.” He shows up when years later, from the graveyard of murder and death two families have found forgiveness and a future. He shows up when a person like Andy Catlett can look at his life and say, “I am a child of forgiveness.”

In those moments, in those moments when the other cheek is turned and the enemy is loved and forgiveness is practiced, Revelation does not seem so far away. In fact, it is almost like Jesus is with us now. It is almost like Jesus is with us now and he is saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

¹ Wendell Berry, “Pray Without Ceasing,” in *Fidelity: Five stories*, pp. 3-60. All portions of this sermon were quotes or summaries from this short story.

My guess is if we dig deep enough, every one of us here can say, “I am a child of forgiveness.” While I hope that each of us can look at our own lives and see how we are children of a forgiveness that has been practiced, I know for certain we can see how God has practiced forgiveness for us. When God reconciled the world to himself through the death of Jesus, we are told God was not counting our sins against us. (II Corinthians 5:19) We are forgiven. We are and always will be children of forgiveness.

I have a vision of you, my dear friends at Dunn’s Corners. You are standing on the porch of your life. You have been wronged and hurt and the world holds up a rope and invites you to join in the vengeance and the destruction that takes an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But you respond differently. You have been held by your friend. Jesus has held you. You have been wrapped in his embrace. The love that was in him has been transferred into you. His grace, his mercy, and his compassion have filled you up. The world calls you to leave your porch and join them in vengeance. I see you on that porch. And I hear you speak. You say, “I’d ask you not to do that.” I see you reflecting on the Jesus who lived for you and died for you and saying these powerful words, “I am a child of forgiveness.”

In this vision, heaven is not so far away. Jesus is near. His kingdom is near.

With that vision in our mind and with that end as our goal, dear old Della Budge, she of the iced cake on a stand like a lighted lamp, Della Budge gets the final word.

Pray without ceasing.