Good morning St. Philip’s! I greet you in the name of the Great Counsellor, Jesus the Christ! March is only 10 days away and the Duke Blue Devils are just where they should be at this point in the season, the Yankees signed Cris Carter who tied the National League last season in home runs, 88 people have died in a suicide bomb blast at a shrine in Pakistan, the US has backed off its support for a two-state deal with Israel and Palestine and civilians in Aleppo, Syria have been intentionally targeted by Russia and Syrian Rebels.

Let us pray: O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

So here we are, here we are present or accounted for amongst the living as we gather this morning for worship in this the House of the Lord on the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany in the liturgical life of our church! We pick up the biblical narrative here in the Gospel of Matthew as Jesus continues His exposition with the Sermon on the Mount which serves as an interpretation of Mosaic Law and specifically today as it pertains to retaliation and loving our enemies. I would like to take as a subject this morning The Choice is Ours, The Choice Is Ours. There are three thoughts that I would like for you to take away from the text this morning.

The first thought that I would have you consider is control of the situations in our lives depends upon our choice. The “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” directive was originally intended as a restriction rather than permission. It was designed to restrain blood vengeance by fixing strict limitations on revenge and retaliation. Similarly, Jesus’ interpretation of the following, “But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”. On their face these instructions from Jesus seem to promote passive nonresistance, which appears to place the intended victim into a position of moral superiority but this is not the intent of this interpretation by Jesus. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, then that suggests they would have had to use the back of their hand. This type of slap if done by a superior to an inferior is shameful. This type of shaming would be an enormous blow to the personal honor and reputation of an Emperor or superior and would be extremely hard for them to recover. I am reminded of fights that occur in during sporting contests. If the referee sees you strike someone and does not see the person you struck retaliate then the person who threw the punch will be ejected from the game. And, not having that person’s contribution may be all that is needed for that team to lose the game. And, if...
we are talking about Tom Brady, LeBron James or Derek Jeter their loss is almost catastrophic. What if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had decided to respond with force when the Selma police let the dogs loose upon the protesters on the Pettus Bridge as they beat them with their police batons and sprayed them with high-powered water hoses. Fortuitously, those images are now ingrained in our collective psyche thus those Civil Rights protesters made monumental progress for the cause by the images captured that day as they continue to influence even to this day. One could argue that they gained control of the trajectory of the movement in that moment of turning the other cheek. We, too, have the chance to regain control of the situations of our lives by how we respond to that which happens to us. Jesus is imploring us to make what may be for some a difficult choice which is to oppose evil with non-violent resistance and if we can, this will do more to justify our cause than by us retaliating in kind. But, *the choice is ours, the choice is ours.*

The second thought that I would like to submit for your consideration this week is that our exercising of restraint exposes the emotional ignorance of the aggressor. Management Professor, Massimiliano Ghini, presenting at the NexusEQ Conference at Harvard in 2013, showed a link between leader’s Emotional Intelligence, the impact on organizational climate, and how that drives performance. His research showed that Emotional Intelligence predicts 76 percent of the variation in organizational engagement; that factories with higher organizational engagement achieved higher bottom-line results, and that, during the three-year project, employee-turnover dropped by 63 percent.” What does this mean? It means that leaders of companies that manage their emotions effectively will succeed. What is emotional intelligence and what is its applicability for us as Christians? Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify and manage your own emotions and the emotions of others. to include - emotional awareness; the ability to harness emotions and apply them to tasks like thinking and problems solving; the ability to manage emotions, including the ability to cheer up or calm down another person. This is what Jesus is inferring here with His language of “Do not resist evildoer”, “Turn the other cheek” for Jesus was the embodiment of emotional intelligence. He is challenging us as His followers not only to regulate our own emotions but to also be possessive of the ability to cheer up or calm down someone else. How are we to do this one may ask? We are to exercise restraint and speak kindly to one another. I shared in a sermon a couple of weeks ago that being kind really matters and so does refraining from gossip, resisting cliques and factions, being cognizant of how our words and actions may affect others, and seeking to adjust our inner motivations toward love and forgiveness. None of what Jesus is asking of us here as we seek to follow Him is easy but it is what is expected of us as the people of God. The Choice is Ours! If we cannot do it as the followers of Christ who will – the world surely will not as we see division, chaos and recklessness pervade our communal life. Possessing self-awareness, empathy, social graces, and self-regulation during the times in which we find ourselves is more important today than it ever has been in my lifetime. It is imperative that we step up our love for one another as some in this country are seeking to dupe us into believing that we should live in fear of each other, that we should exclude certain people from certain countries, ethnicities or faiths because of the sins of
the few - some are choosing not to exhibit the revolutionary love that Jesus would have us display. But, *the Choice is Ours.*

The final thought that I would like for you to take away from this text is following Christ calls us to seek to embody God’s empire here on earth. These six focal points of the Sermon on the Mount provides us examples of what it would look like to live out this higher righteousness to which the people of God are called. As the people of God, the love we manifest for one another is the same love that God has for us. The higher righteousness demonstrated in these two vignettes does not impose upon us a set of legal laws that we are bound to follow nor does it imply that we forget about the law. No, the Law is God’s good gift and guide for living. Jesus provides us interpretation of the law and commentary upon what is required of us. The walk with Christ is not without hardship and we all will stumble and fall along the journey but ours is a journey based upon the promises of God and one of those promises is that God will never leave us nor forsake us during our periods of trial. Have you ever felt abandoned by God? Asked yourself what’s the use? Or, stated I can’t turn the other cheek when someone hits me. In this life, we will have challenges and periods where we feel alone and distant from God because we may feel that the requirements are just too much. But, don’t you worry St. Philip’s, don’t you worry because we serve a God that intimately knows us, sees the trials that we endure in this life and walks with us through them. Our task as the community of God is for us to live into that higher righteousness and that we never give up on love nor upon each other. I would like to leave you with some encouraging words from the Isaiah 41: 10 -14:

10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
11 All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish.
12 Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all.
13 For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

*The Choice is ours, St. Philip’s, the Choice is ours!* Amen!