

Jesus' Greatest Sermon: You Have Heard it Said, But . . .

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Matthew 5: 21-37

I once spilled some red wine – I'm quite sure it was sacramental wine! – on a very nice and very light-colored sweater. I cleaned up the mess as best I could and the next day took it to the cleaners. When I came to pick it up a couple of days later, I was told that the stain was still there – they had not been able to remove it. It was explained that the stain had gotten too deeply embedded in the fibers of the sweater, you might say it was now a part of the sweater, and it simply could not be rubbed away. Well, in the challenging series of teachings we just heard from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I believe we are hearing his inquiry into the fabric of our lives. He wants to know, what is embedded there, in our hearts and souls, what is of lasting value and what should be washed away?

It is always a great temptation for the preacher to stand up here on a Sunday and make the Gospel as easy as possible; to say that the path of Jesus is the path of common sense, that Jesus basically is the way of reasonable, conventional propriety and common wisdom; that Jesus will make you, your life, your work and all your relationships better, easier, more successful and purpose-driven if you just follow him and do what he says; Jesus – the solution to your problems and the answer to your questions. Yes, it is easy and oh so tempting to say that. And I would if I could just skip over the words we heard today: "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." Just when I am getting comfortable with Jesus, such a nice boy – maybe we should invite him over for dinner - there he goes provoking hard questions and instigating even more problems. There he goes asking what values, what priorities, what beliefs are embedded deep in our souls.

Today, we heard Jesus say, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets." Then we hear him take various aspects of the law, already difficult to keep, and intensify them. "You have heard it said, but I say to you..."

"You have heard it said that you are forbidden to kill your brother.

I forbid you even to be angry with your brother." For Jesus, brutal words, vicious thoughts, are the same as saying, 'I wish you were dead. Again, it is not just what we do, it is also what we think and say, what is embedded in our hearts.

"If the offering plate is passed to you on Sunday, and you are getting ready to drop in your usual \$100 bill, and just then you remember that you are engaged in a dispute with someone, leave your bill on the pew and go out and first make peace with your neighbor, then come back and put in your offering." C'mon, Jesus, can't we wait until after the offering... after church? No, reconciliation cannot wait, not if we are going to follow this Lord.

"You have heard it said that adultery is forbidden. But I say, even to look at another person lustfully, inappropriately, is to have committed adultery in your heart." Is there anyone here this morning who has never looked at another man or woman in the "wrong" way? Don't answer that. It's a rhetorical question. But again we see that as Jesus interprets the law what really counts are our basic attitudes, the choices we make, what we allow to shape our thoughts and govern our actions.

"You have heard it said you can give your wife a certificate of divorce, but I say I don't care what the law calls it, it is adultery." What are we possibly going to do with that one? There are feminist scholars that insist these hard words really are a radical statement in support of married women. In the first century, a divorced woman was essentially abandoned, treated as worthless. Divorce was often an assault on the value of persons, an abuse of power and a trivializing of commitments. So one could argue that Jesus' admittedly harsh comments are a strong statement in favor of nurture, safety and honor for all people in all relationships. Much more could be said about this, but again we see that as Jesus interprets the law, what matters most is the value and integrity of each individual, and again, what we carry in our hearts.

In the sermon there are six examples of this "greater righteousness", including the familiar turn the other cheek and love your enemy teachings. Says Jesus, you want to be good, to be righteous, to be my disciples, then don't just keep the law like the scribes and Pharisees.

Exceed them – go beyond the law, better yet, live out its deepest meaning. What is going on here? Is this the same Jesus who told his disciples not to worry about Sabbath laws, who healed on the Sabbath and welcomed all kinds of outcasts around his table...even women? Is this the same Jesus who often just ignored the dietary laws and laws concerning who was clean and unclean and chose to hang out with pretty much anyone? So why is he raising the legal and religious bar so high now? It feels like he is being so hard on us.

A couple of Fred Craddock stories – Craddock remains one of my favorite preachers. “I was the guest preacher at a church in Louisville. The minister of the church told me, ‘Now you go on down by the choir, and I’ll join you there.’ I thought he was going to have a prayer from the back. But he disappeared. The service began and he wasn’t anywhere to be seen. I was wondering where he was when a window on the side of the church opened and he crawled in through the window. He came up and sat with me through the rest of the service. And he acted like a fairly normal, decent human being. Afterwards I had to ask him, ‘What did you do that for?’ He said, ‘Well, everybody just sits out there so bored. I thought I’d give them a little something extra.’”

Is that what Jesus is doing with these challenging words... just giving us a little something extra, trying to shake us up a little? Maybe he isn’t even serious... just wanting to rattle our chains and see how we react. I suppose that’s possible.

The second Craddock story: “I was driving through a small town in Tennessee at two o’clock in the morning. The sign said, ‘Speed Limit: 30 miles an Hour’ so I slowed down to thirty. It was two A.M. and I knew about those small town police sitting around, looking for something to do. So I slowed to under thirty. But here he comes and he pulls me over. I said, ‘I was not even going thirty.’ He said, ‘I know, but do you see that other little sign down there? It says, School Zone, 15 miles an hour.’

I said, ‘But officer, it’s two o’clock in the morning!’

He said, ‘Does it say, except for two o’clock in the morning?’

“ ‘Well, no.’ ”

I think Jesus’ words are words for two o’clock in the morning, when no one is looking, no one is holding us accountable, no one really cares what we are doing. What then? Do we still seek to live truthfully, faithfully, non-violently; do we still seek reconciliation and healing; do we still do all we can to build and nurture, and not tear down or destroy, relationships?

Again, this section of the Sermon on the Mount can sound so unlike Jesus; can sound almost like he is trying to impose a entire new set of “shoulds” on our lives, as if we don’t live with enough of them already. Is he holding us up to a standard of behavior which we can never meet, setting us up for failure, again raising the bar too high?

Or could he be holding up before us a vision of what life in his kingdom, his realm, is all about? Indeed, could he be inviting us to live as if the realm were already present among us; inviting us to transcend broken relationships, broken covenants and live toward mutuality and healing and wholeness; to move away from that which divides and toward that which unites and nurtures? In his words I hear a sense of urgency. Clearly he sees this is as absolutely crucial which is why he uses powerful images such as the fires of hell or cutting off one’s own hand. I see these images as passionate hyperbole, again used to underscore the importance of what he is saying: “It is better for you to cut off your hand than to miss the promise of my Kingdom.”

In the words of Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, “This good news calls our whole way of existence into question. If we are indeed ‘in God’s image’ then the central task of our life is covenant-making and covenant-keeping. It is a promise both rich and heavy. Our central human vocation is to be with brothers and sisters and for brothers and sisters. That is who God is...that is who we are called to be, expected to be, promised to be.” This is the righteousness that transcends that of the scribes and Pharisees.

And let us never forget that the ultimate foundation of goodness and new life is not how well we master a new set of rules. It is our ongoing and deepening relationship with Christ, the one who both tells us what we need to do and then gives us the resources to do just that...namely his abiding, forgiving, renewing, reconciling presence among us, enabling us to be more capable of faithfulness and faithful discipleship than we ever thought possible.