

“A Vision of Right Relationships”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 11, 2018

4th Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 119:33-40

Matthew 5:21-26, 43-48

Our readings for this week involve two of Jesus’ antitheses – those proclamations that “You have heard it said...but I say to you...” – the first and the last of these six statements that appear in the Sermon on the Mount. Both have to do with how we relate to those who might want to harm us. The first stipulates what we *are not* to do – be angry with others and insult them. The second stipulates what we *are* to do – pray for our enemies.

Many of us probably have one of two reactions to these passages and the commands that they contain. First, we’ve heard such commands from Jesus so often that they hardly register any more. “Be reconciled;” *okay, sure*. “Love your enemies;” *sounds nice, why not?* The second response takes Jesus’ words more seriously, but assumes that, for us, they are out of reach: “No anger or insults;” *you can’t be serious*. “Pray for your enemies;” *are you kidding me?* Both of these commands – and the others that Jesus offers in-between – seem from this point of view to be idealistic, even ridiculous; too crazy to apply in the real world.¹

“You have heard it said...but I say to you...” Sometimes, it is easier to live by lists of rules and laws than it is to live in authentic, redemptive, loving and right relationships. Laws can be static; rules, situational. So, here, Jesus reaches into the Law to reveal its true objective: the commandment of radical love; the valuing and protection of our neighbors.

Our God is a God of community. It is later in Matthew that Jesus will say, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also.” (18:20) Nothing that we do as disciples, as members of the community, is an autonomous action. It has an effect on those around us. And when we remember there are others around us, perhaps our actions will be shaped by their presence. In other words, when we remember that God is with *us*, and not just that God is with *me*, we realize that we are not simply members of a community, but shapers of community, who are likewise shaped by our participation in community.

For instance, it is not enough to prohibit the killing of another. The point is the value of the other. What is required of us, therefore, is that we not only fail to harm them, but that we are engaged in proactively seeking their good, affirming their worth,

¹ David Lose, “The Revolution Starts Here”

even if at the risk of our own good. And so, the onus rests on us; we dare not wait for them to act, to seek us out, to offer us reconciliation. In fact, Jesus says, we cannot even rightly worship until we have made a move toward the other with whom we are in conflict.

Well sure, we say, God is like that, but we are not God. We are human and finite. Our lives are conditional, bounded by circumstance. God may cause the sun to rise on the just and unjust; God may be impartial, but living like that is not possible in this world. Instead, my family comes first – I must provide for them before others. My country comes first – I must protect my own before my enemies. My bank account comes first – I must ensure my future before I give to the poor. And yet, in God’s Kingdom, there will be no limit to our goodness, no system of pre-qualification, no fear of scarcity; only benevolent grace.

In the midst of the final antitheses, the one about loving our enemies, and praying for them, we find an analogy, which could be expressed like this: God is to sun, as humans are to love. In other words, God sends the sun to shine on the good and the bad. So our love for our fellow human beings is to be directed toward both those who love us and those who hate us. This is not an analogy that necessarily reflects the way that things are, but the way they ought to be. Thus, if we hate, we will be the same as those who instinctively retaliate when wrong is done to them. We will be the same as those who love those who love them and hate those who hate them. We will be the same as those in the world around us.²

And yet, Jesus is calling us to move towards something new; something that is beyond the Law and nearer to a vision of right relationships. What if God isn’t interested in us keeping the Law for the Law’s sake, but rather that God cares that we keep the Law for *our* sake; that is, because God loves us. I’m sure that every parent has made rules for their children – who might have thought at the time that you were being an overbearing tyrant – but as they mature realize that the rules their parents set: don’t play in the street, use good manners, eat your vegetables; were all intended to care for and protect them and help them experience, if not today then someday, more in life than they could otherwise.

These antitheses are given to the Christian community by Jesus so that we might live in a manner that is compatible with his vision of reality; how we should act in the concrete situations of daily life. If we are inclined to read over these familiar words too quickly, or dismiss them as pious idealisms, maybe we should slow down and take them more seriously. For, here Jesus is laying before us the plans for the Kingdom he is proclaiming, and the new way of life that he is offering. So, before joining in, we should probably stop and find out just what it is we’re getting ourselves into.

² Alyce McKenzie, “A Love Like Sunshine?”

Jesus is telling the individuals in his audience that their actions matter to those who were sitting next to them on that mountain. Likewise, what you do during the week reflects on and gives witness to your fellow church member; who you choose to be in the world not only reveals yourselves, but also those with whom you are in relationship or claim connection. It is when we start thinking and understanding that our actions not only reveal who we are, but also the faith communities of which we are a part, that we begin to feel the weight of what it means to be in communion, in membership, in relationship with one another.³

The final line of this passage – “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” – helps to reframe the whole antithesis section of the sermon. For while the Greek word that Jesus employs, *telos*, can be translated “perfect,” it typically describes something not so much morally perfect as it does something that has matured, grown up, and now reached completion. *Telos* is the goal, the desired outcome. So, a fruit tree’s *telos*, we might say, is to grow tall and mature so that it can bear fruit.

It is possible to hear these commands, therefore, as an invitation to be those people that God has created us to be so that we might not just persevere through the challenges life presents, but actually to flourish; making a difference to those around us by sharing with them the abundant life Jesus has given us. Like the apple trees that we have planted outside these windows, we may have not yet reached full maturity, but with the proper nourishment, we can continue to grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus and the vision of right relationships that he offers.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Maybe it sounds crazy, or near impossible. But Jesus is not only dead serious about what he promises to us: the people of his body, the church; but actually will die – and rise again – to show us it can be true. AMEN.

³ Karoline Lewis from *WorkingPreacher.com*