

“Impractically Speaking”

Sermon – February 23, 2015 Stone Presbyterian Church

It’s interesting that people who believe in a literal interpretation of the bible, want the Ten Commandments posted everywhere, and push for bibles to be read in schools, never seem to touch on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 through 7 or his Sermon on the Plain in Luke chapter 6 of which we heard the middle part today.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned”

I don’t hear those words as part of promulgating a Christian nation. Certainly, you don’t see it in our political leaders and radical policy changes in the past four weeks. Actually, it has been the diametrical opposite; they are, in fact, anti-Christ.

Many are outraged and angry. Others despondent and resigned. Others, of course, are fully supportive. So, as followers of Christ, what are *we* to do? Your initial reaction to today’s gospel lesson might be the same as mine—you judge and condemn those who whose actions are harming other people, particularly the ones most in need, most vulnerable.

And yet, by doing so we risk becoming the self-righteous, the holier-than-thou people we criticize. So, do we just go along and let the world go to hell in a handbasket?

No, but we are to take Jesus’ words seriously. These people we see grabbing for power, punishing those who oppose them, arrogantly lying—if you view them as the enemy then you are to love them. Or on a local level, love those who support them.

That seem impractical at best. You mean if they slap me down, I should just take it? Well, yes and no.

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As is my custom, this past week I watched a commentary on this passage by Tom and Amelia Boomershine. Amelia relayed the following narrative:

“I've been studying history of slavery, and came across this book called “Slave Narratives” and the stories in there were from these were interviews done in the 1930s of formerly enslaved persons who, at that time, were quite old but they were still lucid and able to tell about their experiences

So this one person related a story about their faith, their religion, how they worshiped and he was saying that the only thing they were really weren't allowed to do was worship—but they would kind of sneak away.

And they had a tub with that they would gather and worship. So this one enslaved person was praying at the tub and the master found them and started whipping him. And he prayed, he prayed, “Lord, have mercy on my master” and in response the master kept whipping him. And this happened like three times. He kept saying “Lord, have mercy on master” and finally the master, kind of in frustration, stopped, cursed, and left him there.

They certainly credited the Lord with stopping the whipping. An interesting example and not that all that long ago, 150 years maybe, a person praying for his very literal abuser.”

This story is not to justify suffering, but to show by doing the opposite of the abuse, it actually got it to stop. Now it did not get the man free. Most likely didn't stop future whippings. But it was part of the long struggle against enslavement and oppression. Every act counts.

As Tom Boomershine said in in the commentary:

“In many ways it takes more courage than picking up a weapon and killing the other person. There's no guarantee that it's going to turn things around. You may get killed in the process but in the long run it is more likely to be a successful strategy for transformation.”

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Jesus’ strategy is not passive, it is very active, as was Dr. Martin Luther King was, following Jesus’ teaching. Standing up in the midst of oppression in non-violent ways, though, is not easy and often misunderstood as weakness.

Today’s Old Testament story about Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers shows this a bit.

For example, even though Joseph credits God with using his brothers’ treachery to save Egypt and, by extension, Jacob’s whole clan, he still names their sin, saying, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt” (Genesis 45:4). There is some “truth” spoken into this “truth and reconciliation” moment.

In addition, Joseph doesn’t forgive immediately, but only after (as told in the previous chapter) his brother Judah has offered to rescue Benjamin by taking his place as a slave in Egypt. It appears that Joseph looked for some growth in character among his brothers before offering them reconciliation. Joseph even requires a kind of “reparation” or “restorative justice” for his brothers’ betrayal, in that they—the ones who sold Joseph away out of jealousy for their father’s love—are tasked by Joseph with reporting all of his successes to their father: “You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt” (Genesis 45:13).

Therefore, even though Joseph frames all that has happened as somehow incorporated into God’s providence, nevertheless human agency, responsibility, and accountability are not erased. Joseph forgives his brothers not because they are pawns in some unstoppable divine cosmic plan, but as a gift of grace.

Joseph chooses grace because he recognizes that God has used even his brothers’ treachery, evil as it was, toward the overcoming of a devastating drought.

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Grace does not excuse evil, but it releases the claim of retribution and opens the door to reconciliation.

Jesus’ directives in the Sermon on the Plain show us, the community, how to put God’s mercy into practice.

Three things happen when the community acts on these directives.

First, the witnessing community extends the mercy of God -- and the hope of being part of the Kingdom or Realm of God -- to those who otherwise face destructive lives.

Second, those who extend mercy (and the Realm) find that their experience of mercy deepens as part of their present, if partial, experience of the Realm.

Third, the church models the promise of the Realm for other communities.

The “golden rule” of Luke 6:31 has the Realm as the implied reference point.

Jesus’ followers are to relate to others according to the perspectives and actions of the Realm. It might be stated this way: “If you want to live in a world that has the qualities of the Realm, then treat other people in Realm-like ways, especially as described in the Sermon on the Plain.”

For example, to be “kind” does not mean to approve but means to seek the best interest. God wants even the ungrateful and the wicked to repent and become a part of the movement to the Realm. Indeed, in Greek the word “kind,” [*chrestos*], is related to the word “grace,” [*charis*].

We should not, however, mistake the admonition to stop judging and condemning [Luke 6:37] to mean that the church should never make a moral judgment.

Rather, in the end times context of this sermon, it means that the church should not act like it knows the final verdict on those who oppose the Realm of God. Human perception is always finite. Moreover, enemies have the opportunity to repent until the apocalypse.

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Now if this seems impractical, remember this is exactly how Christianity managed to not only survive but thrive in its first 300 years when Christians were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. Loving others as Christ loved and died for us was ultimately more powerful than anything on earth.

We are to be a light on a hill, to stand up for what is right, and to oppose not by force but by love. We are to be willing to take the attacks when we do so without responding in kind. Not because we are meek, but because we have the courage to stand up, name the sin, and model the behavior Christ espoused. And we do this as individuals, but more importantly as a community of faith in Jesus Christ.

As the renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote, “The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.”

People are counting on us. Let’s go.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.