

With Hearts Untroubled

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Texts:

Matthew 5:38-48 “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

John 14:25-31. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (v.27)

May 26, 2019 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

This happened many years ago. I was standing at the front door of the church speaking with members as they left worship. I had preached on the Sermon on the Mount. A gentleman took my hand and said, “You know, that sermon was fine for the church, but I don’t live in the church, I live in the real world. And what Jesus said just doesn’t work in the real world.”

I don’t remember what I said at the time. I do recall that I couldn’t shake that comment. It was the kind of straightforward comment that requires reflection. Although the man’s comment assumed an idealized vision of life in the church – where sin is alive and well – it gets at a core problem of Jesus’ teachings: what we might call their “impracticality.”

It happened that this occurred not long before Holy Week. And, as I was re-reading the Gospel accounts of the Passion of Jesus something suddenly struck me. I don’t know why it took so long. Here’s what I realized: Jesus died in the real world.

Jesus was born in the real world, where a paranoid ruler named Herod murdered every baby in his kingdom. Jesus lived in the real world, where religious folks bickered over who was righteous enough, and people struggled against corruption, and armies killed to terrorize a population into submission. And Jesus died in the real world, at the hands of an empire that used every means possible to conquer and subdue the world. Jesus did not live in an ideal world. He lived in this one. And here’s the kicker.

Jesus taught in the same real world in which he lived, suffered and died.

Years ago, I started a sermon by saying: Christianity has a problem The problem has a name. The name is Jesus. It’s true. He is a challenge, our Lord.

If we take Jesus seriously, he is not an easy tutor. And, notice, he’s an equal opportunity offender. Doesn’t matter if we are conservative or liberal, Fundamentalists, evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Coptics or Nestorians: sooner or later, we all get the treatment from Jesus.

When Jesus speaks, he is as likely to say something that bothers us as comforts us. And what is really ironic is this: Sometimes when he is comforting us (“Let not your hearts be troubled”), he says things that bother us. Certainly, his Sermon on the Mount can be a bother.

I’ve often wondered what it felt like to have heard Jesus preach what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Many of us will remember the Monty Python treatment of the occasion. Jesus stands on a hilltop surrounded by thousands of eager listeners, so many listeners, in fact, that many are a fair distance away and unable to hear him distinctly. When our Lord says, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God” those close-by heard “Blessed are the peacemakers,” but further out in the crowd, straining to hear his voice above the wind and the crowd, others heard, “Blessed are the cheesemakers,” leaving them to wonder, “What’s so special about cheesemakers?” Which, I imagine, led to the first alternative critical footnote in the Greek New Testament.

But I’ll bet everyone sat up and listened when Jesus came to this part of the sermon: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also, and if anyone sues you to take your coat, give him your cloak as well.”

I can imagine those who might have dozed off during the sermon being elbowed by neighbors, “Did you

hear what he just said? That's crazy!"

And to make matters worse, after Jesus contradicts what many people consider to be the best common-sense realistic moral codes of all time and the most reasonable fair-play doctrines of justice, he caps the whole teaching off by saying that we are to act in the way he teaches us because to do so shows we are God's children.

Jesus says: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust... You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

There are so many things Jesus teaches in this passage, but I shall focus today on just two:

First, the value of the life to which Jesus calls us does not depend upon how well it is received in this world or whether it "works" (that is, whether it achieves the goals we hope). We live a particular life as followers of Jesus whether it leads us to a smooth life and a peaceful situation or a rocky path, a lonely garden, and a cross.

Second, sometimes, however, our living the way of Christ may indeed change hearts and minds right here and now. In other words, sometimes it does "work" in this world.

I want to elaborate just a little on both of these points.

First, Jesus is teaching us that whether or not the way of life to which he calls us is "practical" it reflects clearly the character of God whose love is universal and absolute.

Clarence Jordan was a legend when I was a young preacher. In 1942 as the world engaged in its second world war, Clarence, his wife, and another couple founded an inter-racial farming community on 440 acres of land near Americus, Georgia. A Greek New Testament scholar by trade, Clarence became a farmer dedicated to the equality of all persons, the rejection of violence, and good stewardship of the land. In the 1950s and 1960s the farm was often threatened and attacked by segregationists. There were even bombings. The Federal government chose not to rock the boat. And the State government backed the segregationists who saw this little band of Christians as a serious threat.

Through it all, Jordan just kept on farming and translating the New Testament. And it is Jordan who provides what I think is the best explanation of what Jesus means when he says that we are to be "perfect."

According to Jordan, Jesus is all about teaching us how to live like children of God. Jesus is telling us how to resemble our heavenly Father, which means that we are allowing God to make us (and here's the troubling word) "perfect." The key to understanding what Jesus means lies in what Jesus meant as "perfect."

Nobody's "perfect," right?

Jordan tells us: The word we translate into English as "perfect" is from the Greek word, telos. It's a familiar word in Greek. It's the word, for example, that gives us the philosophical term, "teleological," having to do with the ultimate end or goal. In the New Testament it is the same word Jesus utters from the cross, "It is finished." "Finished." Jesus isn't proclaiming from the cross "This is just perfect." He is crying out with his dying breath that his work is complete, that he has brought it to fullness.

And in one of our all-time favorite passages, I Corinthians chapter 13, "the Love Chapter," this is the same word Paul uses in verses 9-10 to say, "For we know by parts and we prophesy by parts, but when that which is complete comes it supersedes that which is partial." "Complete."

Jordan adds: "Love, being whole takes precedence over knowledge and prophecy, which are incomplete. Paul likens it to reaching maturity.... Love is the adult stage.... Love is that which makes (us) 'outgrow childish things' (like revenge) and become mature."*

"You, therefore," Jesus says to us, "must be perfect (mature, whole, complete, having integrity), as your heavenly Father is perfect (mature, whole, complete, having integrity)."

This is the goal of God's creation of us and Christ's calling of us. We are to be children of God, and to leave the consequences in God's hands. We don't know what will be the result of our lives. We don't know

what consequences will come from the lives we live. Ours is to live as God calls us to live, and to leave the results to God.

The second thing Jesus is teaching us here, however, is this: Sometimes our living the way of Christ does change hearts and minds right here and now.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed and taught that non-violent resistance was the love of God made operational. He believed that if one is beaten and imprisoned for justice, without returning violence for violence, one's bearing the pain without retaliation has the potential to soften, and open, and change the heart of the unjust. He learned this from his reading of the New Testament, and from Mohandas Gandhi, who famously said, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, leaves the whole world blind and toothless."

Recently, I heard a wonderful story told by Jack Kornfield that gives legs to this teaching from Dr. King and the Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy, for course, from its source, Jesus of Nazareth. I'd like to close by sharing with you this story.

Jack told how a friend of his, Terry Dobson, was once engaged in training in the martial arts. Terry was studying in Japan with one of the most famous teachers in the world. This teacher taught that the martial arts are a spiritual discipline designed to open our hearts to others. Hearing this story I can't help but think of Mr. Miyagi in "The Karate Kid." But this was the real thing, not just a movie.

Terry "a great big bear of a man" was riding a tram through the city of Tokyo. As it made its way from stop to stop picking up children returning from school and shoppers taking home their groceries, it picked up a man in filthy laborers clothes who entered the tram car like a tempest. He stomped and shouted and cursed. He obviously was drunk. Weaving drunkenly through the crowd in the tram car, screaming abuses, he hit a woman holding her baby, the blow sending her flying, struggling to protect her infant. He tried to kick an elderly woman as she and her husband fled to the back of the car. Everyone was frozen with fear. "I was young then," Terry later wrote, "and in pretty good shape. I had been putting in a solid eight hours of training" in martial arts "every day for the past three years. I thought I was tough."

His teacher had told Terry and his classmates over and over that the disciplines they were learning were meant for reconciliation. If one resorts to violence, his teacher told them, one has broken his connection to the universe and is already defeated. The entire purpose of the discipline was to bring the body into spiritual connection with the universe, not to train a person to become a fighter.

Terry thought he had learned the lessons of his teacher, but really, all the while, he was spoiling for a fight. Here was his chance, a legitimate opportunity, he thought, to defend the innocent and beat the pulp out of somebody. "These people are in danger." Terry thought, "I need to use my skills." Terry stood up and the angry man immediately spotted him and focused his rage in Terry's direction.

A split second before the violent man started at Terry, someone shouted loudly, "Hey! Hey!" It wasn't a threatening shout, but the sort of call we might make across a crowded train station to a loved one who had just gotten off an arriving train. "Hey!"

The man spun around to see who had shouted and spotted a very old, very small Japanese man sitting, smiling, waving his hand. The elderly man beamed a smile, as though he was eager to tell this angry man something. "Please come here," said the elderly man. "I'd like to talk to you." The man shouted back with obscenities asking why he should bother to talk to old man. But the old man just continued to beam at the drunken man, his eyes sparkling with interest. "What have you been drinking," the old man asked.

"Drinking Saki," the man bellowed back, "But it's none of your business."

"Oh, that's wonderful," the old man said, "I love Saki too. Every evening my wife and I warm up a little bottle of Saki and take it out into the garden and sit on an old wooden bench, and we watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. My great-grandfather planted that tree and

we worry about whether it will recover from the ice storms we had last winter. Our tree has done better than I expected, though, especially when you consider the poor quality of the soil.”

The old man, his eyes full of joy, looked up into the eyes of the angry, drunken man, who by this time, puzzled, confused, was so intent on trying to follow the friendly words of the old man that moment by moment his face began to soften, his fists to unclench.

“Yeah,” said the man standing above the little elderly man, “Yeah. I love persimmons too.”

“Yes,” the old man said smiling. “Yes, yes. And I’m sure you have a wonderful wife.”

“No.” the man sad flatly. “My wife died.” Standing there, to everyone’s surprise – including Terry, who still stood behind the guy waiting for his chance to contribute to world peace by beating the heck out of him – standing there, the man’s shoulders began to shake. He was a poor man, a laborer, a big strong man, and here he was standing alone in this crowd beginning to sob. “I don’t got a wife. I don’t got a home. I don’t got a job. I’m so ashamed of myself.” Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Just then, the tram arrived at Terry’s stop. And as he got off, he could hear the old man saying, “Oh my. That is so sad. Please, please, sit beside me and tell me about it.” And as the tram pulled away Terry saw the man full of Saki and sorrow lay his head in the elderly man’s lap and weeping like a little child, while the old man gently stroked his filthy hair.**

Terry said that he realized that if he had resorted to violence nothing good would have come. He had seen the power of reconciliation exercised. Now he realized his teacher was right.

And so is our teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give you. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.”

How can such teachings that run counter to our practical experience possibly be the grounds for untroubling our hearts?

We know the answer already.

Such teachings remind us that our hearts will always be troubled if our comfort depends upon the conditions of this world. Our peace of mind will always be threatened if it depends upon how well life treats us. But we can live with hearts untroubled if we place our hearts, our lives, the ultimate outcomes of all we are and all we do in the hands of God.

Amen.

*Clarence Jordan, “Sermon on the Mount” (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1970, revised edition), 63-71.

** Jack Kornfield, “Stories that open the mind, mend the heart and lead to joy,” Heart Wisdom Podcast, Episode 92.