

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Jesus said WHAT?

Matthew 5:21-47

Sunday, February 26, 2023

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I must confess that quite often when I get up to preach and see all of you I find it fascinating that most of us are here seeking to follow a person who was so radical and offensive that he was executed.

Will Willimon likes to tell about the time he preached on Jesus' parable "The Laborers in the Vineyard" (Matthew 20:1-16). After the service a young lady came up to him and said, "I was really troubled by the service today." She asked, "Where do you get these stories that you tell in your talk?" Willimon replied, "Stories? I guess I get them from growing up in South Carolina." She said, "Well I was really bothered by the one today. I just don't think that's anyway to treat people. I mean, if you work longer than other people, you should get paid more." Willimon said, "Wait a minute! That's not my story, that's from Matthew." She said, "Matthew?" He said, "Yeah, it is in the Bible." Willimon noticed that she was wearing an usher tag and he asked, "Why are you ushering here?" She replied, "Well that tall guy over there, I'm dating him. And he needed somebody to usher today so he called me and here I am."

Willimon said, "I am curious. What is your religious background?" She said, "We went to church some when I was a kid, but I'm not anything really." Willimon said, "Well let me tell you something. Just for your information, there is a sense in which you are the only person who got the story this morning. You found it offensive to your notion of justice. Right? Outrageous. Right? Well, just so you know, the man who told that story was later murdered for telling it. You got it. It really is an offensive, outrageous story. You got it."

Mark Twain said it well for many people: "It is not what I don't understand in the Bible that troubles me; it is what is perfectly clear that does." Anybody who gives a serious reading of the gospels and what Jesus had to say can't help but appreciate Twain's remarks.

The church talks a lot about Jesus, but I have found that the church says very little about what Jesus taught. It doesn't take a biblical scholar to figure out why. Jesus' teachings are radical and often offensive to us, so we

find it easier to talk about Jesus in general terms instead of the transforming gospel that he preached. In fact, the first time Jesus got up to preach in his hometown, he almost got killed. The people he grew up with were so offended they tried to throw him off a cliff! How's that for sermon feedback? I'll tell you why later in the message. Jesus had a knack for ticking people off.

Today we are going to take a look at the challenging and often radical things Jesus taught. Why did he say those things? And why do Jesus' teachings trouble us so much? If we find them so troubling, why do Jesus' words still have such an impact on us today?

There are perhaps no other words in the gospels that trouble us more than our scripture reading for today. Jesus is preaching his famous sermon, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7). And he is on fire! He is at the place in the sermon where he is replacing old laws with new ones and they are doozies! He says in Matthew 5: ²¹ **"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'** ²² **But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.** ²⁷ **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'** ²⁸ **But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

Well, all that would be tough enough to swallow but then Jesus drops this big one, ³⁸ **"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'** ³⁹ **But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.** ⁴⁰ **And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.** ⁴¹ **If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.** ⁴² **Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.** ⁴³ **"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'** ⁴⁴ **But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** ⁴⁵ **that you may be children of your Father in heaven.** ⁴⁶ **If you love**

those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Jesus said what? Now, this is almost too much to bear, isn't it? Can you believe we claim to follow someone who tells us to turn the other cheek and love our enemies? It's outrageous, especially in our culture whose mantra is "Protect what's yours;" "Don't be a doormat."

Jesus, the one who tells us to be nice to each other and treat people like we would like to be treated, that's the Jesus we like. That Jesus fits well into our comfortable lives. The Jesus who tells us he is the living water that satisfies our deepest thirst, we will take that Jesus. The Jesus who tells us he will give us eternal life, we like that Jesus. But when this Jesus commands us to take it on the chin and not fight back and give to people we don't like and, horrors of horrors, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us and use us and gossip about us and slander us? Well, we will have none of that, thank you!

A colleague of mine tells about the time the dynamic preacher Tony Campolo came to preach at his church. He was so excited. Campolo is a fantastic preacher who can really motivate a congregation. He said for most of the sermon he had the congregation in the palm of his hand. They were agreeing with everything he said and hanging on his every word. They were loving him. Then the sermon turned and the energy went right out of the room. Why? Well, Campolo said an outrageous thing, a very offensive thing. You're not going to believe what he said. He asked the congregation if they had prayed for Osama bin Laden (this was several years ago). Campolo reminded them that Jesus commands us to pray for our enemies and that certainly includes bin Laden. My colleague said he got angry letters for weeks about the outrageous thing Campolo said. It shouldn't surprise us. Jesus was murdered for what he said.

I remember calling up a close friend of mine to complain about someone I didn't particularly care for. Some of you may find it hard to believe that I, one of your ministers, might find someone disagreeable. If you do, please remember that I am moving on toward perfection, but I'm not there yet. Anyway, I was upset and I was going on and on about why he had upset me, how I had been wronged and mistreated. My friend listened patiently. And then he said the most annoying thing in the world. You know what he said? "Have you

prayed for him?" I don't know what I found more troubling – the fact that he asked the question or the fact that I had forgotten to pray for him.

Sometimes it is hard to follow Jesus. Why did Jesus have to say what he said in our text for today? Is he serious? Why can't we just cluster together with people that we like and say, "good riddance" to those we don't care for? Why can't we feel good about how good we are and enjoy a little disdain for those who do all the bad things in this world? Why? Well, the answer why gets to the heart of the gospel and why the Christian faith has stood the test of time. And sometimes that answer comes from the mouth of a child.

My son is 5 and is getting more and more into video games. There is one we like to play together. It is the mobile version of Battleship. It is a fantastic game. It is not your childhood battleship! You use torpedo's, radar, bombs, etc. It is an exciting game of strategy. Well, the other day Paul and were playing a person online and beating over and over again. He kept playing us because I am sure he wanted to win. So, in the middle of a game, Paul grabs the phone of out my hands and said, "Daddy, let's let him win this time." I was irate. "What in the world are you talking about? Give me my phone. No way!"

Then Paul looked at me and said, "But Daddy don't you get up and talk to people about being kind to others." Needless to say, I was convicted. He was right. But what I wanted to say was, "Yeah Paul, but not in Battleship!"

You know why I think Jesus' words are so tough and challenging? Because Jesus is constantly obliterating our boundaries of love. We are always trying to draw lines, noting where God's loves stops. And Jesus is always erasing those lines. What's more is Jesus is always obliterating the values we feel good about. What we often think is good and noble does not come close to the values of God's kingdom.

We believe in the American dream – make as much money as you want and be free to do whatever you want. It's your life. It's your money. Eat, drink and be merry! Yet Jesus rather inconveniently replies to that through the parable of the rich fool, "You fool! Right now your life is required of you and all this money, whose will it be? You never realized that God made you rich so you could bless others."

We believe in being fair, in giving people what they deserve. We believe in rewarding hard work. Yet Jesus inconveniently replies through the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, "I choose to pay those who

worked one hour in the field the same amount as those who worked all day. Are you envious because I am generous?"

We believe God is going to reward us for being faithful to him all these years. Yet Christ turns to a lifetime criminal on the cross who wasn't faithful a day in his life and who converted at the last minute and says, "You will be with me in paradise." That's not fair, is it? A man on death row converts at the last minute and he gets the same reward as those of us who have been faithful our entire lives!

We believe in getting even! "He hurt me and I am going to hurt him back. What he did was unforgivable and inexcusable!" And yet Jesus inconveniently replies, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Turn the other cheek. Forgive seventy times seven."

We believe in being successful, in being happy, in going after what we want. And yet Jesus inconveniently says, "Unless you come and die and take up a cross and follow me you cannot be my disciples. Unless you lose your life for my sake you will never find true life. Unless you learn to sacrifice for the sake of another you will never understand what life is. Unless you live a life putting yourself second and others first, you will not experience life."

The homeless man we see on the street. He could get a job and find a place to live if he wanted to, right? It wouldn't do any good to help him, right? The young man in and out juvenile detention centers – he makes his own choices, right? It is irrelevant that he didn't have a daddy growing up and his mother beat him, right? You can't be responsible for irresponsible people, right? And Jesus inconveniently replies in Matthew, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was in prison and you visited me. When you did it to them, you did it to me."

No wonder Jesus was murdered, huh? Jesus gave us a high definition picture of what it looks like for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And sometimes that picture is so unlike our values we have to look away. Oh, we like to make all kinds of caveats about it. "Well, Jesus was just telling a story. Jesus was just trying to make a point. Jesus really didn't mean that. Jesus was just exaggerating."

We can dress it up all we want but the truth is Jesus turned our world upside down because he turned our values upside down. When the world sees no value in those who are oppressed God calls us to bring them

justice. When the world wants revenge God calls us to show mercy. When everyone else around us has compromised their integrity God calls us to keep ours. When all the world wants to do is use its resources for more power God calls us to use our resources to heal God's values. And that's why Jesus' words are often so difficult to take.

You want to know why those who heard Jesus preach for the first time got so angry and wanted kill him? Because he said the love he came to bring to the world was for everyone, not just those on the inside. It was even for those they hated the most! They couldn't stand it and almost threw him off a cliff! They would have if Jesus hadn't found the exit quickly! You can look it up (Luke 4:16-30).

The thing that offends us about Jesus is the one and only thing that will heal this world and transform it. Because when you get down to it and boil down everything Jesus taught it comes down to this: God's love is limitless. It knows no bounds. It always loves. Always forgives. Never gives up on anyone. And Christ calls us to embody that same sacrificial love and forgiveness in the world.

God never intended his boundaries to be less than the whole world. None of us have a monopoly on God's love. And shame on us when we think we do because when we try to restrict God's grace to ourselves, we cut ourselves off from that very grace. Someone once said, "It is impossible to love Christ without loving others and it is impossible to love others without moving nearer to Christ."

Chuck Colson was once counsel to the White House and the founder of Prison Fellowship. He tells about the time he took a group of people into Indiana State Penitentiary to conduct a worship service with inmates on death row.

After the service, the visitors were checking out, doing the necessary protocol when visitors leave the prison. But Colson was concerned when he discovered that one of the visitors was missing. Well, Colson hurried back to the cell block to find the lost visitor. Well, he found him. He was sitting in a cell with one of the prisoners with his arm around his shoulder. Colson was angry. He shouted at the man, "Don't you realize your violating our privileges here? When we're asked to leave, we should leave! You can cause trouble for us by lingering behind like this!"

The man looked up and said, "I'm sorry. This is James Brewer. He's sentenced to die. I'm Judge Clement. I'm the man who pronounced the sentence upon him. Forgive me for lingering behind, but we both needed some time to forgive each other."

Jesus is relentlessly in love with the world. And thank God for that love. Where would be without that love? And would you believe there is room in his arms for everyone. There is room. There is plenty of room. So, I have this budding notion that when the church finally gets this and embodies Jesus' relentless love in the world, especially to our enemies, the Kingdom will come. Amen.



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