

WGUMC February 9, 2014 Matthew 5:17-20
"The Weightier Matters"

The Sermon on the Mount poses a unique challenge for preachers. We have to interpret a text that is essentially about Jesus interpreting a text. So I'm going to begin by talking a bit about biblical interpretation. Listen to this story that the psychiatrist, Carl Jung, used to tell:

“The water of life, wishing to make itself known on the face of the earth, bubbled up in an artesian well and flowed without effort or limit. People came to drink of the magic water and were nourished by it, since it was so clean and pure and invigorating. But humankind was not content to leave things in this Edenic state. Gradually they began to fence the well, charge admission, claim ownership of the property around it, make elaborate laws as to who could come to the well, put locks on the gates. Soon the well was the property of the powerful and elite. The water was angry and offended; it stopped flowing and began to bubble up in another place. The

people who owned the property around the first well were so engrossed in their power systems and ownership that they did not notice that the water had vanished. They continued selling the nonexistent water, and few people noticed that the true power was gone. But some dissatisfied people searched with great courage and found the new artesian well. Soon that well was under the control of the property owners, and the same fate overtook it. The spring took itself to yet another place—and this has been going on throughout recorded history.”

[From *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, by Robert A. Johnson]

I like this story. It conjures up a lot of things for us. It reminds us that our insatiable thirst for power and wealth has never left us. It makes us think of how easily a precious gift can be turned into cheap merchandise. And it cautions us that in this life what we attempt to control, we're bound to kill.

What goes for the water of life goes for the Word of God. Too many people throughout our history have attempted to fence the Word and charge admission to it. Too many have proclaimed themselves the sole proprietors of the Holy Bible and were so engrossed in their rules of interpretation that they didn't notice that the word they were preaching was no longer life-giving. The living Word had to go elsewhere to be heard.

Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount to people who were seeking a living Word. In his day there were many competing interpretations of the scriptures, what Jesus here calls, "the law and the prophets." The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes and the priests all made their claims on the truth. But in their efforts to control the meaning of the text, they rendered it meaningless for the masses.

Jesus came not to abolish their Law. He came to fulfill it, to fill it full of life and power. He came to take down the fences, turn over the admissions tables, so that the Word of Life could

live again for the least and the lost. He came not to debate the letter of the Law but to expand its reach into all the dark corners of our conscience, filling all the holes in the human heart, and touching every tendril of the human spirit.

To unbind the Word of God, he began with the blessings, the beatitudes. He wanted to paint a picture for his hearers, a picture of the blessed life. We heard them last week: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled....” These blessings make up what a life lived according to the Word of God looks like.

The rest of the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' instructions for how to get there. So the sermons from now until the beginning of Lent will be about just that: how to live the blessed life and how to be a blessing to others.

That's not to say that I claim ownership or am planning to put up a new fence around the Sermon on the Mount. No. Mine is not the only interpretation. It is certainly not ultimate truth. But I do hope that, by the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, you will be able to hear the Word somewhere in, under, or around my words and together we'll come a little bit closer to the blessed life.

Here we go. The Law and the Prophets. Jesus is at his most Jewish in the Gospel of Matthew. Throughout this Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as an ardent upholder and wise interpreter of the Law. He warns, "...whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." [5:19]

Compare Jesus in Matthew to Paul in Galatians, where Paul describes those who are under the Law as cursed rather than

blessed. [Galatians 3:10ff] Paul argues that Gentiles don't have to follow Jewish law in order to follow Jesus: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." [Gal 5:1]

But doesn't that make Paul one of those who is not only breaking the commandments but teaching others to do the same? When it comes to what to do with the Law, there seems to be a lot of tension in the New Testament. That's because there was a lot of tension among the early followers of Jesus. And there is good historical evidence that the conflict lasted not just for a few decades but for several centuries.

In fact, even when the Jews were out of the picture, the conflict over rules kept being revived at different times and in different forms among different groups of Christians. We see the scars of those old battles whenever we get into a discussion about law and grace or works and faith. To put it

very crudely and broadly, Christians are still trying to figure out where following the rules, any rules, fits into our religion.

I was preaching on this text back in 2002, when my daughter, Kristen, was two. I asked her, "Kristen, what do you think of rules." And she promptly answered me, "I have no rules!" A lot of us think that because a lot of us never grew out of the terrible two's.

So, I was pondering the Law at Kaleidoscope on Thursday night and as I was listening to this passage for the third time, I heard a word that I had missed the first two times. Jesus came to fulfill not just the law, but also the PROPHETS. Now, we think we know (and probably don't) what he meant by fulfilling the law. But what did Jesus mean by fulfilling the prophets?

Who were the prophets, anyway? The prophets were people called by God and anointed by the Spirit of God to speak the truth of God. The prophets upheld the Law, but they

had a way of pointing out to people the parts of the Law that were most important.

Here's an example from the Book of Isaiah: The people are complaining to Isaiah that they are suffering and God isn't listening. They are being pious. They are fasting, but God is too slow in responding. So, the prophet points out that while the people may be fasting from food, they aren't fasting from injustice. They are praying to God while oppressing their workers. Isaiah tells them that the only fast acceptable to God is one that involves doing justice: sharing their bread with the hungry, covering the naked with clothing and bringing the homeless poor into their houses. "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am." [Isaiah 58:5-9]

The prophets were all about priorities. And Jesus was a prophet. So when Jesus bad-mouths the Pharisees in the Book of Matthew, he isn't attacking them for preaching the law but

for not practicing the most important parts of it. The problem is that the Pharisees keep getting things out of proportion, keep majoring in the minors, as we used to say. Sounding an awful lot like Isaiah, Jesus says to them, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you [do the trivial things like] tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."

[Matthew 23:23]

So, we have God's Law and God's Son (and prophet) Jesus who tells us what is most important about it: "justice, mercy, and faith." He echoes the Prophet Micah, who sums up the Law in the same way when he says, "...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." [Micah 6:8] Focus on these three things, and you will fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

Follow these rules and the Word of Life will live again for the least and the lost. Now, I can't tell you what that's going to look like in your life, because the rules will mean different things at different times for different people. We even have a Methodist version of the rules, because John Wesley worked them into the rules of the Methodist societies. Twenty-first century Methodists are still trying to follow these rules: Do no harm; do good; stay in love with God.

The rules are simple, but obeying them can get pretty complicated, so as we continue working through the Sermon on the Mount and get down to the nitty gritty, we'll have to keep checking in with Jesus, our Rabbi (Teacher). We'll have to keep asking him, "What would *you* do?" Thirsty for an answer, we'll have to keep coming to the well. And as long as we don't ever convince ourselves that we own it, as long as we don't fence it in or try to sell it off, other people will keep coming from miles

around to be filled with the life and power of God. So be it. Go
to it.