

This section of our year long study is called: Join the global uprising. Our Bishop started us off last week, talking of how, as followers of Jesus, we have a new identity. Salt for the earth, light on a hill. Creative nonconformists. A people called to see things differently, called to understand what is right and what is blessed differently from the way the world sees. When we accept that as OUR identity—well, then life will take us on a very different path. A path that begins with tradition, yes, as a starting point. But a path that takes us beyond tradition. A path to a place, in our hearts and minds, known as the kingdom of heaven. Let us pray:

We continue today with our look at the Sermon on the Mount. This passage in Matthew, several chapters long, is the single greatest collection of Jesus' teaching that are recorded. The first section, known as the beatitudes, had a pattern to it: "Blessed are . . . for they . . . Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." And so on.

The section we look at today also has a pattern. "You have heard said that . . . but I say. . ."

But this section begins by setting the stage—and by addressing, or dashing, expectations.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets." For some this was probably a great disappointment. The law and the prophets, after all, can be quite burdensome. 613—that's the number of laws in the Hebrew scriptures. And those laws have been subject to interpretation. For example, honor the Sabbath—no working on the Sabbath, what about meal preparation or must you not eat on the Sabbath? And in modern times, is turning on a light switch work, and therefore forbidden on the Sabbath?

There were, after all, a lot of rules so those hoping that Jesus was going to shake things up and say some of the laws, especially one's seen as difficult, were no longer required.

And those prophets, they could be demanding too. Micah with his "due justice" and Isaiah with his, "don't oppress your workers, bring the homeless into your homes, share your bread." Well, they were pretty demanding too.

Some in the crowd were surely hoping that Jesus would give them a break, that he would say, "don't worry about all those rules and all those laws."

So when they heard Jesus say, "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets," that was not what they wanted to hear.

“Where is the rebel,” they may have thought to themselves, “where is the rebel who will wipe all this away?”

The more traditional folk, however, are feeling a bit better about this long-haired, robe-wearing teacher. That sounds more dramatic today than it would have in Jesus’ time, when everyone pretty much had long hair and wore robes. But in any event, they were a bit relieved.

“I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.”

“Oh, no. What is this,” they were thinking.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and the scribes, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

And now everyone is worried. Exceeds? Exceeds the Pharisees? But they are the most pious, the most righteous . . . why everyone knows that Pharisees are above and beyond people like us. How could we possibly exceed the Pharisees?”

Jesus was proposing something new. It wasn’t about following the path of tradition and it wasn’t about abandoning tradition and striking out in a wholly new direction. Jesus was talking about the path in the direction that tradition was headed, a path that tradition was pointing to. Not a path that was limited by where tradition went, but rather did cover new ground, ground beyond tradition with glorious new vistas and new sites to see and people to meet, and yet, a path that ultimately took you to where tradition was intended to go.

Because the problem with tradition, with the law and the prophets is that they don’t go far enough. They are part of the journey, but they didn’t make it all the way to the destination.

And so Jesus takes tradition and explains the intent behind it. “You know the letter of the law, but the purpose—let me tell you about that,” he says. “You know the road sign, but let me show you where it’s really going.” It’s a little like seeing a road sign for Los Angeles on part of old Route 66, but that road doesn’t quite get you there.

You have heard it said, “don’t murder. But there’s more to it than that.” And then he goes on to talk about the kinds of things, that if not dealt with, can lead to violence and even murder.

“But if you are angry, if you insult, even if you call your brother a fool you are condemned.”

Now, my first thought when I read that is, “who hasn’t called their brother a fool?” No one I know—at least not if they have a brother. And if Jesus means “brother” the way he means “neighbor,” and I think there is good reason to believe he does, then no one. No one has managed to get through life without

calling someone a fool. I'm not sure most of us can manage it just driving through the Spaghetti Bowl.

But Jesus isn't replacing a series of virtually impossible rules to follow with even harder rules to follow. Because the point isn't the calling someone a fool, but rather the recognition that the problem is at the root. The real problem is in the violence and in the feelings that lead to violence. And so Jesus gives us this advice, "when you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift and go and be reconciled first, then return."

Before you try to be right with God, try to be right with other people.

Before you give your offering to God, God wants you to be right with each other. So go and make up with your brothers and sisters, and then, AND ONLY THEN, come and be right with God. So you can't be right with God, if you aren't right with other people or at least try to be.

And then, as if that isn't clear enough and to the horror of lawyers everywhere, Jesus says, "and even if someone is taking you to court, settle with them, don't go to trial. Don't fight to the bitter end, but find a way to agree and get out of that dispute."

Be in right relationship—beyond just not killing each other. Yes that's good. Don't kill each other, better than the alternative—but avoiding murder is not enough. Rather, be in right relationship.

Beyond just not doing violence, avoid violence by avoiding insults and offences that lead to violence and that clog our courts, our criminal courts and even our civil courts, with disputes both large and petty. And if you think those things don't lead to violence, ask yourself why the courts have metal detectors at every door and armed officers called marshals in those courtrooms.

After showing the path beyond tradition in addressing violence, Jesus moves to other areas relating to relationships: marriage, divorce, oaths and revenge or retaliation.

In each case he begins, "you have heard it said," and then the rule. Like "do not murder" the rules address outward behavior. Two in the negative, as prohibitions, "Do not commit adultery," and "do not swear falsely," and two as prescriptions, "when you divorce, given a written certificate," and "an eye for an eye."

Again, as he did with anger, Jesus gets to the true root of the problem. It isn't committing adultery, it's really about lust. It's not just about the act, but the desire—and you would be better off without eyes than to look at someone other than a spouse with desire. Sorry Victoria Secret models, or the people who like watching them, better off taking your eyes out or cutting your hand off than to

lust after another. Why? Matthew doesn't record but I imagine that Jesus would respond, because desire and allowing your desire to grow leads to action and that lead to hurting people. So it isn't just about legalism, but about feelings and that which can lead you to the wrong path.

Divorce—yes, the law provides a way to make it legal, but true fidelity in your heart is what we should be striving for.

Keep your speech simple, a yes or a no. Don't hide the truth in fancy, legalistic words. Mean it when you say "yes." This isn't Simon says where the words only matter if you say Simon Says first. You don't need to say, "yes, and you have my word," and unless you say the magic words, "and you have my word," it doesn't count. Let your yes mean yes. Plain speaking, plain and straightforward.

And finally, "you have heard it said, a tooth for a tooth, but I say, do not retaliate." Not that you become a push-over, not that you allow someone to hurt you, just that you do not hurt them in return, instead holding yourself with respect and demanding the other party does likewise. Now these passages are often misunderstood. Turn the other cheek does not mean invite them to hit you again. When Jesus said, "turn the other cheek," he was not saying become a punching bag, you just have to take abuse.

A brief demonstration: hit on the right cheek is a backhanded hit—like a child or a woman or a servant. To turn the other cheek is to present your left cheek—as an equal. No retaliation, but a demand to be treated as an equal.

Sued for your coat—give your cloak as well. Poor likely only had 2 garments. By giving the second also, the person is naked. Demonstrating just how far the other had pushed him and, significantly, rendering any who saw him as unclean—ritually.

Going the extra mile—we understand that to mean going above and beyond what is expected. And certainly it meant that too—but even more so. A Roman soldier could require anyone to carry his gear one mile. But only one mile. Rome had strict rules against abusing the populace too much. If a soldier required 2 miles, the soldier would be punished. So if a soldier requires you to go a mile, go another, showing grace, but also ultimately getting the soldier in trouble.

And this all adds up to the bottom line for Jesus, love. "You have heard it said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you love your enemy." Everyone loves those who love them. That is no test, but we are called to love the good and the bad. We are called to love like God who causes rain to fall on the fields of the good and the bad, God who causes the sun to shine on the good and the bad, without distinction. You don't earn the rain or the sun. Everyone receives them.

Likewise, we are called to love everyone, the good and the bad. When we hear calls to take care of our own, take care of our own first, as we do so frequently, I cannot help but hear Jesus say, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven; for he causes the sun to rise on the righteous and the unrighteous . . . if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” If you care only for people like you, if you provide only for your direct neighbors and people of your own faith, and people of your own nation, what more are you doing?

“Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect therefore, as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”

And this is Jesus at his most radical. This is the Jesus that many can't quite get behind. This is the Jesus that should give us pause. Because Jesus says love includes the outsider. All those rules and ways we have devised to say who is *us* and who is *them*, all of the ways we have determined to say who is worthy of help and who is not, all of the barriers, one could even say walls, that we have built to keep those not like us out—or at least a safe distance away from us and our wealth and our privileges and our families, all of those things, Jesus says, don't matter. Everyone loves those like them. Everyone loves and cares for those closest to them, those deemed worthy. But God, Jesus says, God causes rain to fall on the worthy and the unworthy. God causes the sun to shine on the evil and on the good. Be like God. Love everyone. Love them all the same. Love the *us* and the *them*. Love the insiders and the outsiders. Love the righteous and the unrighteous.

We may not be there yet. We may not be that far down the road, to accept and even love the other, the unrighteous, even the ones who in our minds are evil. But that is the road God is calling us to walk. That is the direction that Jesus leads us. Far beyond a legalistic way to see the world. This radical love is a third way—not doing away with tradition, but not rigidly adhering to it as the ultimate destination. This is the way of Jesus, beyond anything tradition has taught us. “God is out ahead of us, calling us forward”—not to stay on Route 66, “not to stay where tradition has brought us so far, and not to defy tradition reactively, but to fulfill the highest and best intent of tradition, to make the road by walking forward together.” (McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 134-5).