

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:21-26, 38-48

Sermon Title: "Justice That Brings People Together" (A Journey through Matthew)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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I used to know a man who had a problem with almost everything Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 5-7, and every time these passages would be read during worship, this one man would tell me how much he disliked it. He could not believe that Jesus actually said those things: turn the other cheek, give your cloak and tunic away, go the extra mile after walking a mile.¹ "It doesn't sound practically," he would tell me, shaking his head. "It's a tall order that Jesus tells us to follow, and I don't think I can do it."

On the surface, Jesus' words seem like targets that we can hardly reach. They sound like standards that only a super Christian may carry out. But if we dwell with the words, really let them become a part of us, we get a better idea of what Jesus is saying, and receive a better insight for living.

The passages we read today seem to deal with the issue of justice. Justice in God's sight doesn't have to

¹ Matthew 5:38-42.

do with winners and losers: people who get their way and people who deserve to be punished. When we speak of justice, we usually talk about getting the criminal and locking him up forever. The police say they want to bring the perpetrators to justice, which means “make them go through a trail which will obviously prove that they are guilty.” When President Obama responded to the bomb attacks at the Boston Marathon last Monday, he said that when those who did it are caught, “they will feel the full weight of justice,” which is probably code for “sentence them to the highest punishment in our nation: the gas chamber or electric chair.”

But is this how God defines justice, winners and loser, where winners get even and losers are exiled forever? “Justice is closely related to love and grace.”² Justice creates community between people, and justice allows for that community to stay together. In justice we find love and grace, vindication and deliverance. We might also find retribution when somebody doesn’t wish to stay in community with others, but the hope is for retribution to turn a person’s heart toward forgiveness and repentance. The hope is for everybody to feel safe and welcomed within community.

If we read Jesus’ words from the Sermon of the

² *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, 519.

Mount with this lens – if we are thinking about God’s way of defining justice and God’s passion for justice to be had by all – then we get a better idea of what Jesus is saying. We see how Jesus is talking about the love of God and the love of neighbor that should flow freely among all, without interruption.

At one point Jesus talks about murder. One of the Ten Commandments says, “You shall not kill,” and so people listening to Jesus would understand this. But Jesus says that killing is not just a terrible physical act a person could carry out. Killing doesn’t just involve sticks and knives and guns. Killing may occur within the heart, and then be carried out with the mouth, without raising a finger. “I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother [or sister] without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother [or sister], ‘Raca!’ [which means numbskull, air head] shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”³ Serious business. What is Jesus saying?

Well, Jesus has no gone off the deep end. Jesus is not crazy in saying what he says. He truly means it. Jesus is not erasing the Commandment of God that

³ Matthew 5:22.

says, “Do not kill,” but is fulfilling it. He is deepening its meaning, making it richer and more valuable.⁴ Jesus is getting to the essential core of the Commandment: killing of any sort interrupts justice – interrupts love and grace – and thus killing interrupts community.

Killing comes from having contempt for our neighbor (disdain, disrespect, and hatred). There are many reasons for why we might have contempt for our neighbor, not just for the people who live next to us but for those we see on a daily basis. They do stupid things, or at least we think they do stupid things. They irritate us with something they say, or just the way they carry themselves. We can find millions of reasons to be upset with people, to the point that we resent them. We become angry with them. In our hearts we kill them with unmerciful judgment. When we have to be around them, we don’t kill them further with a knife or gun, just with our silence or cold shoulders or harsh words.

Jesus is promoting justice, and anger has no place there. Contempt, cold shoulders, and harsh words cannot exist within a community. It is so hard to let go of our anger toward certain people, because we want to stay bugged with them. We want to believe

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, cf. 174.

there is no hope for us to get along. Maybe we need to try and think of it this way: It is God's passion for everyone to be in community with him, and also in community with others. God's will is injured every time we hold a grudge.⁵ God's will is killed whenever we become angry and hope not to be around certain people. If we have this in mind, then what we should do for others is not "kill them" but pray for them. Jesus tells us to pray. Pray that God may help them with whatever struggles they face, and that maybe we can help them somehow. Pray that God may surround them with people to love them, maybe even ourselves. Pray that we might see others as God sees them, and so we may be less judgmental, less upset. Somehow, we might bring justice to people who don't have it, and thus they may feel a part of the community with others and God.

It doesn't get any easier when Jesus says, "You've heard it said that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy. I say to you, love your enemy as well."⁶ Those people are enemies for a reason, the main reason being that they did something to us that was unfeeling, unwelcomed, and unresolved. They are enemies, because they still may do things to us that

⁵ Ibid., cf. 176

⁶ Matthew 5:43-44.

hurt. We cannot stand for it. We cannot idly allow them to treat us with disrespect. We find it hard to forgive them. So we categorize them as enemies.

Abraham Lincoln had his share of enemies, and so what he did was place some of them in his presidential cabinet. He was asked why he would do such a thing: put people in a position to derail his work and add to his headaches. Lincoln replied, "In order to get rid of your enemies, you make them your friends." That's one way to do it. This keeps with the spirit of what Jesus is talking about: justice means that we are in community with each other, in which we consider each person a friend, and we look out for the integrity and safety of each other. Maybe by showing love to our enemies – and this takes much prayer, constant prayer – maybe by loving them they may choose to hurt us less. Change the look of the terrain, so to speak: be nicer to an enemy, and watch what happens. Speak kindly, act kindly, show them that there are no grudges between us. Do not count them as an enemy – consider them children of God as we are. We may not become instant friends over night, but every day we can show them what kindness is all about. They may see how their actions hurt us, and wish not to hurt us anymore. They might eventually leave us alone. Look for God's support in helping us with the

idea of making our enemies our friends.

At the very least, Jesus says that we may love our enemies by praying for them: “Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”⁷ Jesus is not saying that we should enjoy getting hurt; Jesus is saying that we should take the upper hand. As sons and daughters of God, we should take the higher road, which is to have the strength to pray for those who willingly hurt us. They need our prayers. They may have no clue why they want to hurt us. They may have no peace in their lives, because all they know is hurt, so that’s why they take it out on us. They need peace. They need community, just as we have community. We might not be able to talk directly to them, but we can speak with God on their behalf. “Often they are either so hostile to us or so separated from us that our only access to them is through God.”⁸ Through prayer, we do not hold onto anger. Through prayer, we hope to feel something for the other person: pity, concern, possibly hope. We don’t add to the pain; we ask for God’s blessing to erase the pain, to smooth the path between us.

So do you remember the man I talked about earlier, the one who disliked much of what Jesus says

⁷ Matthew 5:44

⁸ Bruner, *Matthew*, 220.

in the Sermon on the Mount? Verses 38-42 are the words he disliked the most. He would say to me, “So, what do we do, just become doormats to people? I’m not going to turn the other cheek, if somebody comes after me. If they sue me, I’m going to fight them in court. If they try to mess with me, I’ll mess back.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor, who went to a Nazi prison camp for his Christian beliefs. He did not fight against Nazism with guns or tanks, but he did stand up for the faith in which he believed. He defended God’s principles without hesitation, realizing that his words could kill him. And they did. He was hanged on my birthday, April 9, 1945, just days before an American troop came to liberate the camp. Bonhoeffer said that disciples of Christ are to be “surprising people.”⁹ We do the opposite of what is expected, and that surprises others. That might surprise us.

What is surprising in Matthew 5 is that disciples of Christ are called to “suspend judgment. They respond with grace,” grace that surprises those who are taking advantage of us. That’s not what they expect. When Jesus says to turn the other cheek, to give the extra garment, and to walk the next mile, Jesus is calling for Christians to do something different, something more

⁹ Ibid., 207.

peaceful. Do not become angry and brash and forceful. Do not cry foul, and become the aggressor, and demand revenge. Do something surprising: Seek justice for all with peace. Understand that God's passion for justice should be carried out.¹⁰ Besides, when we go the extra mile for somebody, we get ourselves some more good exercise.

Jesus' words are difficult, maybe because we have used the wrong definition for justice for far too long. Our definition involves more punishment, more retribution, and little mercy and compassion. We should read Matthew 5-7 over and over again, and live with the word of Jesus. Let the words frustrate us, just like that man I used to know. Let those words embarrass us, because we know how upset we may become when people do things that bug us. With our Savior's help, God's justice may be carried out. Community may be had by all. The struggles might not decrease, but love and grace may always increase.¹¹

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, cf. 13.

¹¹ Got the idea for the last sentence from Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, cf. 83. "[For] Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggles, but the presence of love."

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News from Psalm 103: the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us. Friends, believe this news: we are forgiven - thanks be to God! Amen.