

A New Path to Aliveness

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle

E6A February 16, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-37

Jesus said, “21 ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 ‘It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” 32But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 ‘Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” 34But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

If I had to choose one chapter from which to teach the Christian faith, I’d choose Matthew chapter 5. In the 20th Century, Mahatma Gandhi led a spiritual and political revolution from this chapter of the Bible. It was the chapter he focused on as a Hindu disciple of Jesus. When the Lutheran pastor Dietrich

Bonhoeffer published one of the few books he was able to publish, before being martyred by Hitler and the Nazis, he chose the cost of discipleship as his theme and Matthew 5 as his main scripture passage.

Since Luther and the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, we've understood our Gospel lesson for today and Jesus' whole Sermon on the Mount, from which it's taken, in an idealistic way. *You have Heard- that it was said,..but I say to you...exceed the righteousness of Pharisees? Put away your anger? Turn the other cheek? Love your enemies?* "What was Jesus thinking? That's Impossible." So, for centuries we've said that Jesus was only saying these things to put us on our knees to pray for the grace of God's forgiveness. Because no one can actually do these things!

People like Bonhoeffer and Gandhi help us to finally change our tune on this, reviving the crucial importance of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Not only can we do these things, but that's exactly what grace means: namely, God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, gives us the power to do them. It's essential to our ultimate salvation as creatures made in God's image, nothing less than a new Path to a New Aliveness.

If we resist this grace to love like God loves,.. if we continue to turn aside and ignore being made in God's image to love,.. then the powers of sin and death will continue to destroy us. I believe with all my heart that what we're talking about is that important. Our salvation and very survival may depend on it. According to Matthew chapter 5, God's grace is the power to live as the human beings God created us to be.

Here's the thing: as we learn what it means to be human, we finally learn who God truly is. One of the things about Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7 is that they give one of the clearest statements about the need to experience God anew. We humans evolved with a default experience of the gods that is false. We typically worship gods who are idols, not just ancient peoples, but we modern folks, too. We worship all kinds of false gods. (1) There's the Capitalist god that promises an invisible hand to make our economy turn out well,.. as long as we give our full allegiance to it. There's the U.S. national god that says everything our country does is part of a larger plan to bring freedom to the world, of course it's our particular brand of freedom. (2)

Even if we don't fall for those false cultural gods, there are always the false gods we learned about growing up in the church. For example: there's the god who saves only believers in Jesus. Or the god to whom we pray to make things turn out OK for us. It's that latter god who's perhaps the hardest to let go of. The true God doesn't play favorites.

Since the dawn of humanity, the gods haven't simply been the gods. They've been, in some fashion or another, our gods. In fact, that's precisely why they're

“false.” They come from us. They’re a projection of how we relate to one another — which is why there’s always some element of taking sides, of being in or out. Our cultural identities are forged over against the identities of others, and so our cultural gods will always have an element of playing sides, us/them.

Last week, with the Beatitudes, we saw that the most popular human version of “the gods on our side” have favored the rich and successful. God proves to be on your side when you are blessed with wealth and honor and success. This is the false god questioned in the Old Testament book of Job and by the prophets.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus begins his entire teaching ministry with an absolute blasting, a lampooning, of this false god who’s only on the side of the rich and successful. Jesus gives us the inverse: Blessed are the poor, the mourning, the gentle and nonviolent, the peacemakers...

But here’s the crucial thing to realize: if Jesus’ sermon ended there, we might end up with simply an opposite version of the same false god who plays favorites, who takes sides. We might end up with a god who is now on the side of the marginalized and the suffering over against the rich and successful. We end up with a god who turns the tables alright. But we must also see that it’s simply an opposite version of the same kind of god who takes sides.

There’s another big problem with this new god who’s on the side of the oppressed and the suffering. Jesus moves us out of our traditional comfort zone of siding with the winners, but we eventually ask: Why doesn’t this god do something more dramatic to stop the oppression? Why do so many billions of people across this globe continue to suffer horribly at the hands of a few millions who control way too much of this world’s riches? What kind of god is it who apparently is on the side of the oppressed but seems to do so little to stop it?

Before we answer this crucial question, we need to reinforce the fact that God really is on the side of poor and the oppressed. When Jesus and the prophets speak of striving for God’s justice, it means striving to care for those who have the least.

But, it doesn’t mean that God is now on the side of the oppressed over against the oppressor. Like a good parent, God doesn’t take sides, favoring one child over another. God’s like a loving Mother who wants to ensure that all of her children have what they need to thrive and flourish. This can’t happen if God acts like us. We take sides and use force and violence to bring change.

This past Thursday, Feb. 13th, was the 75th anniversary of the bombing of the German city of Dresden. If I remember my history correctly, Dresden had no strategic importance, no war industries. It was a city full of medieval, wooden buildings and civilians. There is no justification for killing civilians in any Just War Theory that I know of, and yet the Allied air forces fire bombed this historic city and killed 10s of thousands of civilians. Was God on our side to justify that?

At the end of my sermon last week, I said that we have a new identity in Christ, and asked how this love gives us a new identity. Well, let's look at our God for an answer. If God is perfectly loving and nonviolent, then instead of being like us, God chooses to suffer our usual way of violence in God's own self on the cross, showing its futility and that it's a lie, and unleashing a new power of love in the world — a love that reaches across all boundaries, even to one's enemies.

At the end of WW II, German youth went to Coventry in England and helped restore the Cathedral that had been bombed by the Germans, and English youth went to Germany to help restore a German cathedral that had been bombed by the allies.

This is the perfect love of God that Jesus ends Matthew 5 with. God hasn't simply switched sides, now taking the side of the oppressed and suffering in the world. Jesus ends this part of his sermon making the true nature of God clear: *for God,*” says Jesus, *makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*” (Matt 5:45).

It couldn't be more clear. Any version of god who takes sides of one group against another is not the true God. Yes, we must be for the poor, the oppressed and the suffering in this world, but not by excluding someone else. God wants all God's children to flourish, and as followers of this good God, so should we. So, in Jesus 'ministry, death, and resurrection he shows us nothing less than a new Path to Aliveness. It began as a tiny mustard seed, Jesus, that's blossomed into a much bigger bush that includes Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, Dr. King, Nelson Mandela, and many others. Our world is changing for good, my friends, for good. Amen!?

Source:

NRSV Bible with Apocrypha.

Sermon of same title by

The Rev. Dr. Paul J. Nuechterlein

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1. When I use the term false gods or idols, I'm talking about, using Twelve Step terminology, Higher Powers which are not the Higher Power. In A.A., one's Higher Power might simply be that of the group itself. It is a real Higher Power that truly can provide healing. But the word God, with a capital "G," has come to mean the Higher Power which is the source or ground of all powers.

2. In referring to these cultural powers of our nations economics and military-protected freedom, I'm not saying they are neither real nor good. Think again in terms of Higher Powers that do provide some good benefits. One might even argue that the U.S. Higher Powers are demonstrably better in many ways than many

other cultural powers. But I am saying that, for followers of Jesus the Messiah, they still fall far short of the Higher Power which Jesus came to reveal to us.