

“Seeking Justice”

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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 5:17-20

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 1:1-3

Therapist Mary Pipher has written a book around the Irish proverb that says, “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.” And here is what she says about how we’re living these days: “With more entertainment, we are more bored. With more sexual information and stimulation, we experience less sexual pleasure. In a culture focused on feelings, people grow emotionally numb. With more timesaving devices, we have less time; with more books, we have fewer readers. With more mental health professionals, we have worse mental health. Today we’re in a more elusive crisis,” says Pipher, “a crisis of meaning, with emotional, spiritual and social aspects. And so we hunger for values, community and something greater than ourselves to dedicate our lives to.”¹ Values, community and something greater than ourselves – these are all things that the church has been handing down generation to generation for more than 2,000 years. Not perfectly, mind you, but purposefully. The purpose of the church is to form a community of faithful followers of Jesus who live according to his teachings.

Our New Testament lesson for today is from Jesus’ greatest and most comprehensive teaching – the Sermon on the Mount. smack in the middle of this sermon about how we should behave and treat each other; Jesus says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” The law and the prophets. The law is about justice, and the prophets are about God’s will in the face of our weakness as a people, as humanity.

Listen to what Jesus teaches about seeking justice in the passage that follows our reading for today; there’s a handout with this in your bulletin that you can look at now. Concerning anger, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” Justice is about reconciling our difference with one another, not about punishment.

Concerning Relationships – Jesus says, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” This teaches us to honor committed relationships such as marriages, both ours and those of other couples. Whether we stay in them or not, we treat the other person right, justly.

¹ Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* (New York: Grossett/Putnam, 1997), 257.

Concerning adultery, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” In other words, maintain self control.

Concerning truth telling, retaliation and enemies, the final three, Jesus teaches us to keep our word, don’t retaliate against people, “love your enemies” and if possible, actually address their needs. Whatever it is that has them acting that way toward you, if you can take care of that for them, do so. **Remove the barrier; don’t put up new ones.**

These are hard lessons to live by, especially in a society like ours that teaches “an eye for an eye.” And yet Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” you will never live into the fullness of God’s desire for you; for us.

Let’s look at why Jesus had to say this to us. The scribes and Pharisees were the law makers of Jewish society at the time of Jesus. They were the ones who set the standards of how people lived with one another. If you lived in the time of Jesus, it was their teaching that told you where to draw the line when you got angry, or what to do if you craved something or lusted after someone? They set the standards you would live by concerning relationships, telling the truth and keeping your word and dealing with those who attack you, your enemies.

In other words, the scribes and the Pharisees who Jesus says had it all wrong – or at least didn’t go far enough – today, these are the laws of our society and the moral codes everyone lives by. Jesus is telling us it’s not enough to live by everyone else’s standards. God calls us to a higher standard, a different standard of living, different than we see in society today. I mean, let’s face it, the standards we live by today only take us so far. That’s why God has for us a better standard of living.

The purpose of God’s way of life is to bring all people into a loving relationship with God and with one another. As followers of Jesus, we can’t separate our relationship with God from our relationships with each other. If we hurt one, we hurt the other. It’s all interconnected.

The leader of a sixth-century Christian monastery² once preached a sermon for the monks that points to what Jesus is teaching us. The monks were grumbling that they were unable to love God properly because they had to put up with one another’s ordinary, irritating presence. (Not that any of us can relate to that.) But to the monks and to us, the preacher said we are wrong to think that other people get in the way of our relationship with God. He asked them to visualize the world as a great circle – kind of like the circle on the bottom of your bulletin insert. God is at the center, and around the edges is all of humanity.

² Dorotheus of Gaza, as described by Roberta C. Bondi, *Memories of God*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 201.

“Imagine now,” he said, “that there are straight lines connecting from the outside of the circle all those human lives to God at the center. ‘Can’t you see,’ asked the preacher, ‘that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to approach other people without coming near to God?’”

We think we can separate what we do in our day-to-day lives from our relationship with God, like we don’t really have to practice what we preach. We do this because it’s hard to practice what we preach; what Jesus teaches. It’s hard to put aside our anger and instead talk things out. It’s hard to control our wants and desires. It’s hard to put others ahead of ourselves.

Turns out, Jesus doesn’t call us to follow the easy way; just the better way. And the secret of Jesus’ teachings – what we can’t seem to learn – is that the better way as embodied by Jesus, is in fact the easier way, regardless of how hard it is to follow. We struggle to follow the teachings of Jesus, and so we struggle to get along with one another. We feel like we have to protect ourselves and our interests, even at the expense of other people. But we don’t.

That’s a pretty simple lesson to take away from today – you don’t have to protect yourself from others, IF we as a society do a better job of seeking justice, and I mean the type of Godly justice that Jesus taught about.

We all want to live a good life, have access to what we need, be surrounded by friends and loved ones. And this is possible, for all of us, but only if it is available to any of us, to everyone.

In a world of “have’s” and “have not’s”, nobody wins – or more precisely, everybody loses. There’s always somebody after what you have, and there’s always someone who has what you or I want. That’s no way to live. It’s not how God wants us to live. God wants us to set aside our fears and competition with one another, and instead trust in him.

Can you do that? Can we stop always being so self-protective and instead be a little more self-giving? Looking out for No. 1 is how society does it. Looking out for the other person, that’s how Jesus does it. And that’s how Jesus calls us to rightly and justly treat each other – by looking out for the other person, for all persons, for everyone we encounter, near and far. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Giver of all, we are so grateful. You have formed this community of faith and taught us how to love one another.

You have blessed each of us with different gifts so that we may serve and care for each other and our world.

Bind us together, Lord. Help us to offer grace where grace is needed. Help us to always see our brothers and sisters as such, because we are your children.

Let no one in this place go hungry or in need, because we are always ready to lend a generous hand.

Thank you for providing all that we need. May the love that we show to each other be a picture of your love to the community around us.

We are one in you, O Lord, you who taught us to pray with one voice, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**