

2-19-17 "Raising The Bar on Discipleship" A Reflection on Mt. 5:21-37 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

The Sermon on the Mount is famous because in part it is not what anyone expected. This morning, for example, our Jesus debunks common knowledge. He does this by raising the bar higher than we thought it was set. Just because something is well-known, or pervasive throughout society, or merely because something is flooding social media, or just because something is the prevailing bar room, or locker room banter at the moment, doesn't give it validity in and of itself. Jesus informs us that just because everybody is doing it doesn't mean it is either okay to do or good enough in God's sight to do. Just because everyone believes something doesn't mean the majority is correct; persuasive majorities of opinion in and of themselves do not automatically mean the majority has a clue—there remains the very real possibility that everyone, having been led off a cliff by some pied piper, hasn't a clue. If everyone and their sister believed that salvation was found jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge it simply doesn't follow that should you be foolish enough to believe it too, that salvation would then be yours if you also jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge.

We need look no further than to the polarized state of affairs in our country today to witness such folly playing out daily—"might does not make right," as the old axiom properly reminds us. He who carries the biggest stick is often the victor, yes; but the biggest stick-holder is frequently the biggest fool, the king without clothes whose foolishness is nakedly apparent to everyone but the king. Jesus is alerting us that a simple majority--dangerously long held sacrosanct in democracies—be they in the halls of Congress, or protesting in the streets of our cities, does not in and of itself, make right. Simply put, just cuz everyone and their mother has jumped on the same bandwagon doesn't mean for a second that the wagon isn't headed for disaster.

In the context to his day, Jesus is saying the law of the land is not absolute—as we, who are friends of Jesus all know, there is a much higher Authority. Law is superseded by the radical graciousness of God. Law forever takes a second fiddle to mercy! And this my friends, connects directly to the words of Pope Francis who just a couple weeks ago stated very clearly that "You cannot reject refugees and call yourself a Christian." The Pope is of course overriding the laws of state, and the whims of populism by reminding us of the very basics of our faith. Simply that grace,

charity, mercy, hospitality are ever and always first in importance. And yes, as is obvious, this means first in importance over what you find chiseled on tablets of stone, or penned on ancient parchments in a National Archive. On a personal note, I much admire how Francis, like his Jesus, raises the bar above common expectations.

"You have heard it said..." says our Jesus, "...but, I say to you..."
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"Yes from times of old you've been taught X, Y & Z, but... Yes, everybody knows, but... Yes you've always been lead to believe, but..." Again, Jesus is debunking common knowledge by injecting lots and lots of but's (one "t" not two). And as we shall see, he does so by raising the bar, that is by shattering expectations, by raising standards above and beyond what is popularly acknowledged—just listen to him, what we may have long believed to be good isn't necessarily good enough. In this way we discover what true discipleship, true Christ-like-living looks like, behaves like. This he does to bless our welfare because unless we hear Jesus, unless we understand Jesus, unless we model our lives after him and his teachings we—the world—are in great, great danger of following any run of the mill pied piper off a cliff instead of following in the ways of God. Our Jesus knows well life's many false voices that easily confuse and distract us long before we experience that life which God has willed for us since day one.

Having said that I'm led to also say, that frankly, I'm not sure just how many people these days tend to take God's law all that seriously in the first place; which is a matter of concern as the foundational teachings and revelations we've received from God are timelessly significant and of utmost relevancy today. I mean, how is it possible for someone who does not belong to the Abraham faith family-- Judaism, Christianity, Islam—to take God's law seriously when they live their lives outside of the family? How many out there in the world could be expected to take God's law seriously when they identify themselves as "Nones" or as "spiritual but not religious?" Not many I would venture a guess. And then the millions who think nothing of any of this—how many of them could be expected to take God's law seriously? Like zero maybe.

And then there is us. We can't let ourselves off the hook on this one. We inhabit today's world too. How many of us Church identifying, card-carrying church goers, be we regular attendees or of the Christmas-Easter variety, elevate God's commandments front and center of our daily lives (don't worry, I won't even venture a guess)? But my hunch is most of us most of the time are much more faithful

to the laws of the land than to the laws of God—I mean, isn't it easier to keep to the speed limit than it is to keep to Jesus' First and Greatest commandment, to love God with all your heart, spirit, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself?

Should we permit God's commandments to slide, naturally grace, charity, mercy and forgiveness are often off the table as well - which is a disastrous situation. It is this which I hear our Jesus address when he says, "you've heard it said, but I say to you..." Jesus could not have been clearer actually. The Commandment to Love not only comes first but gives meaning and insight and understanding to everything else, including any type of law you care to name.

In his sermon Jesus gives concrete examples, he references Moses' laws, what began with the Ten Commandments and over the years were greatly elaborated on by the Jewish community. Jesus begins with murder. Thou shall not kill, you shall not murder...yes, that we have heard once or twice, that we do know. But most of us miss what that commandment is actually teaching us. We who are Jesus' good friends, don't kill, murder, execute, assassinate, commit genocide; we don't even as Jesus points out speak ill of someone, say "you fool" to someone, or say something completely disrespectful like "that 'so-called' judge" or for that matter, "so-called-President" because that is simply not how God wills for us to treat one another. When we treat each other respectfully, lovingly, civilly, then there is no possible way we will ever progress to murder, it's impossible because we're too busy treating each other as our Jesus would have us do.

So here is Jesus' but. "But I say to you" don't just not murder someone, don't disrespect them either! Why? Obviously because love of God and love of neighbor doesn't go there, doesn't look like that, doesn't inflict such damage; love doesn't engage in violence to other human beings, to communities, to peoples, to nations. Just like obeying the speed limit, it is easy not to murder someone; but not disrespect them in any way shape or form, valuing them as yourself, respecting them as yourself, being civil to them in the same way you wish to be treated, holding them forever in your heart, well that takes us to a whole new level doesn't it? I would say so! You see, Jesus raises the bar much, much higher than we ever dreamed it was set. But, this he informs us is precisely what our Christian faith is all about—raising of the bar of common expectation much higher than anyone could imagine possible. Radical inclusion, radical acceptance, radical love, radical justice.

And throughout our lesson, this is exactly what Jesus is talking about. Each example could be looked at in detail—I won't. Yet in each one of them the lesson is clear, and although the extreme hyperbole and rhetoric is particularly offsetting--his disciples would have had no trouble understanding. Our Jesus' teachings on adultery and divorce equally underscores and elevate the Love Commandment. Friends of Jesus are those who busy themselves building communities based on dignity and affirmation of others, whether married or single, divorced or widowed, male or female and it goes without saying, these communities are safe places for both sexes. His teaching on "falsely swearing an oath" again, underscores and elevates the Greatest and first commandment to love. Oath swearing is for people who don't trust one another...oaths actually serve to draw attention to doubt and distrust. The place our Jesus calls us to live our lives has no room for disrespect and lack of trust. In the place Christians dwell everyone speaks the truth in love and hears the truth in love; moreover, everyone lives their lives trusting each other, accepting each others' charity, mercy, love and forgiveness—depending on it--because the Golden Rule reigns supreme over and above everything else.

Yes indeed, we've heard it said, and said, and said... and it has become nauseating, and admittedly in hearing, and hearing, and hearing many hearts have grown stone cold and charity has evaporated where it once thrived and mercy has been twisted by the powerful into weakness, and the warm embrace of the stranger has become for many a ridiculous if not fearful proposition. But—but, friends, our Jesus' teachings, our Jesus' lived examples reveal our world's cure: the law of love! We've heard of it. It is now time to live it. It is nothing less than the Prime Objective of our faith. Love eliminates walls of fear; love banishes anything that impinges upon individual integrity, dignity and respect; love welcomes home those fleeing violence, love takes in those exposed to the elements; love lifts, love unites, love's gaze is broad and encompassing and nondiscriminatory.

Yes, we've heard it said, too, too much has been said—now it is time to resist what has been said and what is and to finally implement what can and should be. Now is the time to raise the stakes much higher than they are presently set. Now it the time to instead, love.

May it be so and amen.