

Matthew 5:17-20 “Fully Alive”

I love visiting African American churches. The music is inspiring. The Spirit moves in magnificent, unpredictable ways, and you can just feel the love. The preaching is great too. Some of the best sermons I heard were in Southside Virginia from the Piedmont District Convention churches. Sermons in these churches start out pretty mellow, but the energy keeps building as the minister starts preaching in sort of a cadence. Usually the preacher has a phrase that he or she repeats throughout the sermon until folks can anticipate what the words are going to be, then everyone joins in. Now, I know it's hard to do when you're just reading words on a page, but can you just imagine Jesus preaching in a cadence like this?

We've been looking at Jesus' first public sermon in Matthew's gospel. Most people call it “The Sermon on the Mount.” Last week, Jesus fell into this cadence where he would start each phrase with, “Blessed are ...” then end it with “for they, or theirs.” “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This week, we're studying another section from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus transitions into another cadence. Alicia/Nakayla read the introduction to this part of the sermon where Jesus tells his listeners that he hasn't come to get rid of the law but rather fulfill it. Then for the next 28 verses, Jesus transitions into this cadence not unlike the kind that you might observe in some African American congregations. He starts each sentence with “You have *heard* it said,” and he ends with, “but *I* say.”

Now here's the thing about preaching in the African American tradition. Quite often, the preacher steps on some toes, which is a phrase that means, “sometimes what the preacher says *hurts* a little.” Other traditions say, “the preacher *convicted* me this morning” which always sounds so ... I don't know ... “court-roomy.” Like you're going to go to jail after you leave the building. But in the African American Church, the preacher often says, “Now I may be stepping on some toes this morning, but if I do just say ‘ouch.’” Jesus definitely stepped on some

toes in this part of his sermon because the topics he brought up were ... *controversial*. So *whose toes* was Jesus stepping on?

See, many of the Jews during that time in history believed that the Law was *life*. And the way you live life to its fullest is to follow the Law to a "T." And who followed the Law better than the Scribes and Pharisees? There's your example. Follow the path of tradition, and you'll be fine. My guess is that there were some folks in Jesus' audience that day who believed this to be true. And I'd also guess they may have gathered there because they wanted to see if this new teacher agreed with them. They were probably a little concerned. For some, Jesus must have seemed like one of those wandering, renegade rabbis who roamed around stirring up trouble. But they came anyway just to see where he stood on their pet issues.

But I could imagine another group of people in the crowd. They were the radical, rebel-against-tradition types who were sick of the Scribes and Pharisees who thought they were better than everyone else because they followed their rules and traditions so strictly. These folks probably came there with the same sort of "let's see if he's one of us" attitudes as the "letter of the Law" people. Maybe they thought, "He's probably just another one of those typical 'Law and Order' rabbis who wants to use the Law and tradition to beat us over the head and keep us in our place."

So again ... *whose toes* would Jesus step on in this first sermon of his public ministry? Those snooty Law-worshippers who made it a point to make sure *everyone* knew how holy they were? Or those defiant rabble rousers who didn't seem to care about the Law or tradition at all? You should know that Jesus was and still is an equal opportunity toe-stomper! What's that old saying? "Jesus came to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable."

So the first thing Jesus does is tell people that he hasn't come to abolish the law. The "Law and Order" folks were probably saying, "Bravo! Preach it!" "No," Jesus, said, "I've come to *fulfill* the Law." That's

when all the Zealots started cheering, “Yeah buddy! That’s what I’m talking about!” Then Jesus said something strange: “Unless your righteousness *exceeds* the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter into the Kingdom of heaven.” Both sides probably said, “What? That sounds really strange.” And that’s when Jesus launches into the, “You’ve heard it said, but I say” part of the sermon.

“You’ve heard it said, ‘do not murder,’ but I say, ‘if you are angry with your brother or sister, or if you insult them, or if you call them a fool, you are liable to judgment and liable to the fires of hell.’” Holy cow! People must have thought, “How many times have I been mad at someone and insulted them?” Why so harsh?! “You’ve heard it said, ‘do not commit adultery,’ but I say that even if you look at someone with lust, you’ve committed adultery in your heart.” And then he gets sort of gory and recommends that if your right eye or your right hand causes you to sin ... get rid of them. As in cut them off. What’s that all about?! Talk about overkill! Here’s the one that freaks a lot of people out ... especially in this day and age: “You’ve heard it said that whoever divorces his wife, then give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say, “whoever divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery, and the guy who marries a divorced woman commits adultery too.” Oh my gosh!! In a culture where it’s literally a flip of the coin as far as whether a marriage succeeds or fails, this is an eye-opener!

So here Jesus is making both sides *very* uncomfortable. In fact, it doesn’t seem like there’s *any* “comforting of the afflicted” going on here. You’ve just got a lot of traditionalists and non-traditionalists squirming out in the audience thinking, “Whose side is this guy on anyway?” Polarization isn’t a new phenomenon. It was alive and well back in First Century Judea. People were looking to see what path Jesus was going to choose. Will he choose the path of the traditional legalists? Or would he choose the path of the ones who were willing to burn everything down just to see what came out of the ashes? Maybe the reason Jesus was there that day was to *propose a third way that neither side ever considered before*. Being fully alive doesn’t come from being

compliant to the letter of the law nor does it come from defying tradition at every turn. Abundant life comes somewhere in between. It comes when we fulfill the highest *intent* of tradition, but also when we break away from their minute details that slow us down to a crawl.

Of the five examples Jesus gives in this part of his sermon, the one that I think *best* illustrates this is in verse 38 and 39 when he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Living under Roman occupation meant getting pushed around a lot. It wasn’t terribly uncommon for a Roman soldier to smack somebody around just to remind them of their place and who is in charge. When someone would get backhanded by a Roman soldier, they would either shrink away in humiliation or maybe beg not be to hit again. The problem is that this just rewarded the oppressor’s violence and made it more likely they’d do it again. On the other hand, some would react by pulling out a dagger and taking out the oppressor. Or at least they’d *think* that because they could only dream of retaliating and taking out these awful Romans once and for all. The problem with this is that it reduces them to the same violent level of their oppressors. Again, Jesus offers a *third* way: Stand tall and courageous and turn the other cheek. Because in doing so, they would choose nonviolence, strength, courage, and dignity and therefore model a better way of life for the Romans than cowering or reflecting their violent example. In other words, “Go ahead. Do it again. Nothing you can do to me will make me stoop to your level.”

Then he gave them the most radical example of all in verses 44 and 45: “You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” 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 makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.’ My guess is that this one sounded just as strange to the strict “comply-with-the-law-above-everything-else” people as it did to the “who-cares-we’re-here-because-

we're-just-mad-at-the-world" people. This third path that Jesus proposed directs his followers beyond what the Law and tradition *requires* and brings them to what *God desires*.

How easy it is to get caught up in the "I'm right and everyone else is wrong" game ... especially these days, and especially in the realm of both religion and politics. I was listening to a TED talk this past week by Megan Phelps-Roper, a relative of late Pastor Fred Phelps who grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. For those of you who don't know, they're the ones whose claim to fame is their very public protests during the funerals of soldiers, celebrities, Gender and Sexual Minorities, Muslims and Jews. Their picket signs contain phrases that are so revolting I won't repeat them here. As a little girl, Megan didn't know any other way than what she was taught. It wasn't until she became a young adult that people outside the church started challenging her. She'd face the usual crowds of counter protesters who yelled at her and cussed her out, but she was taught to just smile and hold her sign higher. But it wasn't until she started communicating with some of them on social media that she discovered that some who laid claim to the same faith she did saw things differently. She met people who, like our church, are opening, affirming, and welcoming to *all*. She met a Jewish family that she befriended and eventually stayed with for a short time when she left her family and the Westboro Baptist Church behind. She also married a man that she often debated on Twitter. Can you imagine that? She said it wasn't until she started listening to and meeting others who were also willing to listen to her that she understood this third way ... this third path that Jesus calls us to walk. That's when she understood what it means to be *fully* alive.