

“BUT.....!”

1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-48

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I'm going to talk this morning about that little word, "but."
We often use it to limit what we will or can or might be able to do.

From the kid who says, "But I don't *like* broccoli" or "But I don't want to practice piano,"

To the things we say as adults:

"But I'm not artistic."

"But I'm not a leader."

"But no one will listen to me."

"But I'm too old to do that."

"But nothing's going to make any difference."

Even in the church we do it:

"But we don't know that song."

"But we don't have enough money."

"But what if that's too radical a thing to say?"

"But we're just a small church; we couldn't make that happen."

"But we've never done it that way before."

Today's scriptures use that word in a way that strikes me as very different. In these readings, the word stops us in our tracks and asks us to reconsider our assumptions and the limits that have defined our understanding of our faith.

We sometimes turn to the scriptures looking for little nuggets of inspiration to confirm and strengthen what we believe, bits of practical wisdom to help us keep our lives on an even keel. Strangely, a lot of people turn to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with that goal in mind. That's not what we find here, though.

Jesus seems to understand that human beings are inclined to believe those things that seem easiest and most obvious – the common-sensical, the familiar, whatever reflects our cultural norms or fits with our image of ourselves and our lives. BUT... that's not what Jesus asks of us. He wants those who follow him to go beyond those limits. To see things differently. To open themselves to a bigger and deeper perspective. To imagine different possibilities. To enter into the very different worldview of the kingdom of God.

In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, he talks about some beliefs his audience will almost certainly say “of course” to... and he says, “BUT... there’s more to this. Dig deeper. Let me show you a bigger perspective.”

“You have learned that murder is wrong.” Of course; we know that. And most of us readily move on, confident that this is one commandment that’s not relevant to us. BUT Jesus says, “murder is wrong” doesn’t go far enough. Don’t you know that your words, your anger, your indifference, your hate can kill another person’s spirit? Generous giving or other religious practices are no substitute for the amends you need to make to someone you’ve harmed. You can’t ignore forever the need to make it right.

“Don’t be unfaithful to your spouse.” Most people will agree that there’s a line not to be crossed here. BUT, Jesus says, genuine faithfulness is a bigger thing. Genuine faithfulness has to do with your attention, your attitude, your heart. Genuine faithfulness is grounded in respect for the other people in your life, and not in mere obedience to the letter of the law.

“You’ve heard that if a man divorces his wife, he should make it official with paperwork freeing her to remarry.” That seems only right - better than abandonment. BUT... Jesus knew that in his culture it was easy for a husband to divorce his wife, no reason required. A woman, course, had no such option. Jesus knew, too, that divorce could leave a woman impoverished and vulnerable. So he tells his followers that commitment must not be so easily dismissed, especially in a far-from-equitable situation.

“Fulfil the vows you’ve made.” Of course we ought to mean the promises we make, and keep them. BUT, Jesus says, don’t make foolish promises in the first place. Don’t make the mistake of thinking you have more control and knowledge of the future than you really have. Remember that you are not in charge of everything, or, really, of much. Speak more humbly. God is not impressed by your boasts. Remember that God is God, and you are not.

“You’ve heard the saying, ‘an eye for an eye.’” The people Jesus was speaking to *had* heard that, and so have we. It seems perhaps a little violent, but the notion of justice it expresses does make a certain sense to us. The intent, which we sometimes forget, was to limit the scope of revenge to something proportionate. In other words, if somebody knocks out your tooth in a fight, you aren’t entitled to kill him in revenge. BUT, Jesus says, there is a better way, and that is to relinquish the need for revenge. Break that cycle of violence and resentment. Recognize a common humanity. Be the one who makes the first move, who goes a little further than you have to, who gives a little more than expected. Pursue reconciliation instead of revenge.

“It seems completely natural to love our friends and family and to hate our enemies.” Oh, we may say that we don’t want to *hate* anybody, but sometimes it does seem really important to maintain a certain distrust, disdain, dislike, even anger and hate toward people (or a person). It allows us to see them as “other.” In our culture, there’s sometimes a lot of encouragement of this, even virtue attached to it. (It makes war possible, for example; it bolsters anti-immigrant feeling; it can energize a cause.) BUT, Jesus says, your enemy is not God’s enemy. Your hate

does not represent the God you claim to follow. So choose the hard thing instead. Try to see with the eyes of love. Let go of a desire to harm or punish. And pray for the people who do you wrong. Who knows what may happen when you pray?

I imagine that Jesus could have gone on (and maybe he did, at some other time) laying out familiar teachings about how to live that most people would consider plenty good enough – that we would probably consider plenty good enough... and saying “BUT ... there can be so much more.”

I should say what’s going on here is NOT (as some have thought) that Judaism was about legalistic rules and Jesus was preaching an entirely different belief system, a more deeply spiritual, heartfelt, and sincerely lived faith. In fact, those larger and deeper understandings Jesus is pointing to were not new, they were always there.

What’s going on is that we human beings have always tended to prefer a pithy motto (I guess we’d call it a sound-byte) and a superficial understanding to a deeper and more complex truth. We’d rather have simple rules than ethics rooted in divine compassion. We find the letter of the law more convenient than its spirit. We avoid examining our own motives too closely. We are endlessly defensive of everything we regard as “ours,” and oblivious to the price we collectively pay for that stance.

And in so without even knowing that we’re doing it, we impose on ourselves these limits that keep us from fully experiencing God’s grace, the power of the Spirit, and the freedom of the kingdom Jesus preached about.

BUT it does not have to be that way. Jesus urges us to follow him into the perspective, the hope, the freedom of life in the kingdom of God. Where new ways of seeing and being open up before us. Where we discover that God’s vision for us is bigger than the vision we have for ourselves.

His theme is very different, but in his letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 3, Paul used the word “but” in a way that strikes me as somehow similar. His big concern in this whole letter is that there are divisions within the church at Corinth. Here he talks specifically about one source of those divisions: members of the church have aligned themselves into factions defined by their loyalty to one of the various teachers who’ve nurtured their community into being. Some consider themselves followers of Paul, others of Apollos; were there other similar cliques? Possibly. Did any of those teachers encourage this? We don’t know. In any case, Paul wants the Christians in Corinth to understand that this way of thinking, however much it may be normal human behavior, is *limiting to their vision*. They are not seeing all that God wants them to be. Paul acknowledges both his own and Apollos’s role – “planting the seed, and watering it.” “BUT...” he says, “BUT *God* gave the growth.”

Again, the little word “but” signals an opening up to a much larger perspective – one that frees rather than limits, one that understands there is always room for growth. There is more to this

life of faith than one teacher, one group, one perspective.... It's *God* who has called us, God who is ever and always urging and nurturing us to grow. To understand that might not erase all the differences the members of the Corinth church have with one another, BUT it makes unity and respect and forward movement and shared purpose possible again. It doesn't make it easy to forego revenge, love our enemies, be faithful in our relationships and honest with ourselves... BUT it frees us from the conviction that such things are not possible. It frees us to grow. It reminds us that we haven't "arrived" but are on a journey of discovering who God is calling us to be. It opens up to us the realm of love, grace, and reconciliation that is the kingdom of God. Amen.