

“LISTENING TO JESUS”

Matthew 5:21-48

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Many people have a morning routine. Mine begins with giving Audrey, our cat, some treats, water and food. Audrey does everything she can to make sure that I don't vary much from this. She's sitting by the bedroom door as I exit. She stops by the pantry where the treats are kept, and looks at me. She goes over to her water bowl, looks at it, then looks at me. She has other routines that she'd like me to adopt as well. When I sit down in my recliner, she approaches with the obvious expectation that I will clear a space on my lap for her. She parks herself by my chair when I'm eating ice cream.

Routines help form a certain rhythm to life that insure that some necessary tasks get done without spending too much time thinking about them. They provide a certain flow that can simplify life or ground life. Some routines we revel in. Some we dread. Some nurture our spirit. Some sap our strength. Some reinforce an excitement. Others bore us.

Some routines help us focus on what's important. And some bind us to outdated, irrelevant and harmful ways of doing things. Jesus was not a fan of some of the routines adopted by his faith community. The Sermon on the Mount represents his attempt to break into the religious consciousness of his faith community and shake it up.

Now Janet and I have preached from this sermon many times, but we've usually focused on a small section. This morning I want us to notice a pattern to these various sayings, a pattern easily recognized in this section of the sermon, but present throughout. "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...." You used to think about it this way, but I want you to think about this other way. You used to think that community could be strong if everyone just refrained from killing each other; but hatred held in the heart is just as damaging to relationships. You used to think that if you kept your hands to yourself, you were righteous enough; but desire, even when you don't act on it, changes a relationship from something holy to something harmful. You used to insure a person's sincerity by exacting a promise; but promises are only required of those we don't trust. You used to think that community would stay intact if each person paid a price suitable to the crime committed, but the path to the beloved community demands that you bear up under suffering.

You don't have to agree with my rather loose paraphrases to see the pattern. Jesus wants us to reexamine our assumed rules of relationship with a view toward enriching our lives. Religion, as it had come to be understood in Jesus' day, was holding them back from what God wanted them to do. Jesus is proposing in this sermon, to use Brian McLaren's phrase, that a spiritual migration is necessary. "These are your assumptions. Here's how I want you to think about it. Here's what I want you to do differently. Listen to me!"

Last week, in the second of our series on following Jesus, I talked about the ways in which Jesus challenged the tradition. This week I'm less interested in the general category of tradition, and more interested in the specific tenets or ideas that make up the tradition. Listening to Jesus asks that we examine those concrete assumptions that hold us in place, stunt our growth, or that suggest we are done with the journey. We cannot follow Jesus without listening to him. This sermon should make us aware that Jesus is demanding, and asks us to do some difficult things, to think differently, to leave many of our routines and habits of thinking behind.

Of primary concern to Jesus in this section are the relationships between members of the faith community and between the faith community and its enemies. Much of what he says remains just as relevant, just as difficult to hear, and just as challenging to follow today.

We can readily accept within the faith community that we should do no physical harm to our sisters and brothers in Christ. But there remains a serious distrust, even disdain within Christ's body. As an institution, we have listened to Jesus in celebrating the gifts of women, those of various sexual orientations and gender identities, differently abled persons. Our denomination bars discrimination based on race or ethnic background. But within many congregations, we have privileged wealth over poverty. We have not always welcomed the stranger within our midst. We have denied our complicity in the segregation so prevalent among churches today. And that's before you consider all the individual enmities and distrusts that distract the church from its mission.

This part of Jesus' sermon reminds us that relationships are hard, and yet vital for a healthy faith community. We see this in the awkward history of the relationship between white and black Christians. At first slaves were not permitted to worship in their own churches. They attended the same services as white Christians, but they were seated separately. They had neither voice nor vote on congregational matters. They had to listen to sermons about God's expectations that they obey their masters in all things. It's hardly surprising that Black Christians moved to establish their own churches. Over the course of the next century and a half, lynching, bombing, vandalism and intimidation continued to threaten the black Church.

Many white Christians want to relegate these things to the past. We didn't commit these crimes. But if we listen to Jesus, we have to accept that it's never just about the crime. The hate, the feeling of superiority, has done as much lasting harm as the violence itself. When Jesus urges his disciples to "come to terms with your accuser" before presenting your offering to God, I hear him saying to us: "You be the generation that makes peace, that acknowledges the harm, and sets a new direction." Side-stepping the blame will not bring the sort of healing we need for healthy community.

I was glad to see Juneteenth added as a Federal holiday last week. Acknowledging the day in which slaves in Texas finally heard about their freedom seems to me to be at least one part of the right path to addressing the racial enmity that continues to exist. It gives me hope that the church will find its own creative ways for healing the racial tensions within as well.

Jesus' sermon challenges many other assumptions that are as dear to our culture as they were to his faith community. He calls on them to give up their right to vengeance as implied by "an eye for an eye." He tells them to refuse to strike back at those who would shame them, but to bear up under adversity. "Love your enemies" may be among the most difficult things he tells his followers.

What makes this so challenging to first century Jews is its specificity. "Turn the other cheek" evoked a particular occurrence in Jesus' world. His audience knew exactly the setting and circumstances in which such a thing would actually happen.

Even without the images that Jesus' sermon evoked for that initial crowd, the words challenge our values today. Surely his words should create a reservation over our obsession with winning and our need to be strong. They make us reconsider our understanding of success and our disdain for weak and passive people. Listening to Jesus is not instinctive. It is counterintuitive and countercultural. Then and now.

But we have a little more work to do to realize the full potential of Jesus' words in our lives. We cannot simply discern the general principle from his examples. We have to translate it into the specific events in our lives. What might seem apt in some circumstances might be bad advice in others. "Turn the other cheek" worked as a strategy in the Civil Rights Movement, but in some cases of bullying has only led to tragedy.

To move from Jesus' words to specific actions he may be calling us to is complicated. That's why we have pastors, teachers, and preachers. It's why we have writers, speakers, and prophets. But most important it's why we have each other, and why it's so vital that we take care of one another, and why we need the other: the neighbor, the stranger, and the enemy.

Jesus speaks through scripture, but the words we find in the Bible pass through our individual filters of personal history, social setting, and faith community among many other factors. But until it reaches the level of concrete action, it isn't being lived out in the world.

So, as I listen to Jesus, understanding that process in all the complexity I just mentioned, here's my concrete list:

Love the earth: Give thanks for the air you breathe, for the kayak on water, for plants that feed your bodies and delight your soul. Learn the names of things: the Linden, Maple, and Hackberry trees whose majesty bears witness to God's goodness, the wren whose frenetic song wakens you in the morning. Vote for people committed to reducing our use of fossil fuels and funding an expansion of renewable energy resources. Eat more vegetables.

Love people: Call your father today. Hug your wife... every day. Celebrate the beautiful people your daughters are. Keep praying for and asking people about their losses, and

their struggles. Rejoice with them in their joys. Be patient with those who disagree with you. Pray for those you hate or hate you... by name. Encourage them to use their gifts.

Love justice: Be impatient with racist comments, ignorance about the environment, slowness to feed the hungry, and failure to defend the dignity of people as children of God. Keep reading authors whose life experience is different from your own.

Love yourself: Take your meds. Eat healthy, walk frequently. Don't get defensive when someone doesn't recognize how hard you're working. Remember, always, it's okay to lose.

Only a few of these things are applications of what we read in this section of the Sermon on the Mount; but those few things are the most challenging and probably time consuming. They're also probably the most important for healthy community. But part of what gives the faith community the courage to hear the challenge of Jesus is the joy we experience as a faith community and the miracle of belonging to this great mystery we call creation. Jesus certainly demands a lot from us, but what a fabulous journey that we get to walk... together. Amen.