

Epiphany 6A  
Peace, Seattle  
February 12, 2017  
Matt 5:21-37

## **PRACTICING THE WAY OF JESUS**

We're sitting at Jesus' feet again today, and some of those words in what I just read strike us as harsh and hard to swallow – no? Did you feel yourself reacting internally to some of those words, like cutting off body parts and facing the hell of fire?

There's a lot that's packed into this section of the sermon on the mount, and we don't have time to try to unpack it all, but I hope we can develop a framework for understanding what's going on here; at list a little bit.

We're sitting at Jesus' feet again today, hearing him lay out a new way of being the community God has called us to be; a new way of seeing what's important and how we are to live as his followers.

Speaking to a series of situations where love of neighbor is at stake, he says, YOU'VE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID... BUT I SAY TO YOU... What is Jesus doing here? Is he rejecting the tradition of Moses? Setting aside the core teachings of his ancestors? What is he hoping to accomplish?

The verses just prior to today's reading help us answer these questions. 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 IT. (Mt. 5:17-18)

**What does this mean?** It means that whatever Jesus may say here it's not meant to repudiate the great tradition of the Jewish teaching, but rather to clarify and deepen it.

In each instance in our text—you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not divorce; you shall not swear falsely—Jesus moves the focus of the conversation from the letter of the law to the spirit; from the surface of the teaching to the heart, soul and marrow, and he sets the bar much higher in the process.

If the word "religion" (*religio*) means to religament or rebind what has been separated, (and it does), then religion's basic job description is simply this: to reconnect what has been disconnected; to heal what has been divided; to make one out of two.<sup>1</sup>

When something is broken, divided, or disconnected, when it is no longer functioning as it was intended to function—whatever the reason may be—it must be reset in order to heal properly.

The human skeleton is made up of 206 bones that serve as the body's scaffolding and protect the body's vital organs. Though it's a sturdy frame, it still has vulnerabilities. Bones are flexible enough to give a bit when force is applied, but if that force is too great, they can snap.

Fortunately, the way the body is designed, bones also repair themselves.

1. Immediately after a fracture occurs, a blood clot and callus form around it.
2. New "threads" of bone cells start to grow on both sides of the fracture line toward one another.
3. Eventually, the fracture closes up and the callus is absorbed by the new cells. This process may take from six weeks to a year.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr. *On the Threshold of Transformation*. p 233

But when the fracture is a compound or displaced one, the bone must be reset before it can heal. Might this be analogous to what Jesus is doing when he says:

YOU'VE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID... BUT I SAY TO YOU...? I think so.

When Jesus says, "I've come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it," his purpose is not drive a wedge between the received tradition and his own revelation, but to rebind what has been separated—to reset it and in the process to strengthen the core; making one out of two.

Jesus invites us, as his community to walk the road he sets before us, and to see how walking that road will lead to life.

His is a way which leads us beyond ourselves. With very specific examples Jesus teaches us today that we are never disciples simply for our own sakes, but for the sake those with whom we share the journey.

Jesus speaks in concrete terms because he knows that generalities don't lead to maturity. Generalities leave too much wiggle room; too much room for me to nod and say AMEN without having to actually commit to specific behaviors.

So when we think about today's text in these terms, it's really no surprise that Jesus focuses on things like:

- what we do with our anger,
- or how we connect our treatment of those who are closest to us to our spiritual life,
- or how easily our appetites can lead us to ruin,
- or how readily we search for loopholes to help us out of relationships that aren't working.

These are issues we all deal with regularly—even on a daily basis! Following Jesus together means not shoving these issues under the rug but working on them with each other. Actually practicing saying we're sorry, forgiving each other, supporting each other on our journeys toward wholeness, modeling for one another what we've learned so far about following the Jesus way.

It seems to me that at times we've treated Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount as such a highly evolved ethical standard that we figure we can just admire it from a distance, when in actuality that's the opposite of what Jesus wants us to respond.

In his book THE JESUS WAY, Eugene Peterson says:

The congregation has always been the primary location for getting the way and truth and life of Jesus believed and embodied in the places and among the people with whom we most have to do day in and day out.<sup>3</sup>

**In other words this ethic to which Jesus calls us is not to be admired but practiced.**

Kai and Naomi are both in the midst of BB season right now. As you watch their teams play, you realize again that playing the game of BB requires that a vast array of skills all come together at once. Developing those skills individually, and then fitting them altogether as a team—which is a whole other dimension—doesn't happen automatically. It takes lots of time and practice.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.health.com/osteoporosis/how-do-broken-bones-heal>

<sup>3</sup> p.4-5.

Being a Christian, a follower of Christ, is that way too. We wouldn't expect a group of people who'd never practiced the foundational skills required for basketball—dribbling, passing, shooting, rebounding, to succeed on the court.

Neither should we expect ourselves as followers of Jesus to succeed without practicing the foundational skills of the Christian way—loving, serving, forgiving, trusting.

Richard Rohr calls spirituality a process of two steps forward and three back. The three back, he says, are the most important.

In our conversations in the car after their BB games, my question to my kids always includes this one: WHAT DID YOU LEARN? In BB as in the journey of faith, it's often the defeats, the things that we fail at, that have the most to teach us.

What if we were to see each Sunday as an opportunity—a practice session if you will—for us to work on the skills that Jesus calls us to embody, so that when game time comes—the rest of the week—we can put what we've practiced and learned into our every day interactions, whatever and wherever they may be?

At the Font Christ calls us BELOVED before we can even begin to fathom what our relationship with God might mean. And at the Table Christ says I'M HERE FOR YOU even when we fail.

Walking the Jesus way is never easy, which is why we need him to be present with us, moment to moment, day in and day out. And why he gives us to one another—so we can be present for each other, emblems of his grace; companions on the way.

Prayer: God you have set the way of life before us and through your Holy Spirit have called us to embody Jesus' way within our life together. Be with us as we take our stumbling steps. Help us to lift one another when we fall. And give us the assurance that nothing can get in the way of our love for us and your desire to make us whole. Amen.