

February 19, 2017

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany

“Being Jesus for ‘Them’”

Matthew 5:38-48

So I did my prep work for this sermon, then I pondered for a bit over a few games of solitaire as I often do. As I also often do, I prayed the Lord would guide my thoughts. A direction for this message formed in my mind, and I jumped on Google and typed in the search, “What’s important in life?” The top result made me thank the Lord for His grace. “The Four Most Important Things in Life.”

One thing I’ve learned is that the internet lies a lot, and it certainly didn’t disappoint me this time. According to this blog ironically titled “Rethinking Truth” the four most important things in life are: Take care of your health, invest in your relationships, install a positive view of yourself, live your purpose, your values and your dreams. In other words, the most important thing in life is you! And that’s completely opposite of the truth Jesus Christ speaks in His Sermon on the Mount. And we need to understand this, because you don’t want to rethink the truth of Jesus—God’s truth.

At the end of last Sunday’s reading Jesus says, *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”*

In that Jesus is making clear that it’s not about you. You shouldn’t be invoking heaven and earth and all sorts of grandiose things to attest to how important your oath is—you’re not that important. Be quiet and let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’.

But boy, do we love to talk and be heard! Especially these days with facebook, tweets, Instagram and the sewer of comments under posts and news stories; so many folks think their words and opinions carry weight and authority—that it’s about them; and that they have the position of vindictive judgment over others.

Jesus says those who follow Him, who He has declared to be the salt of the earth and light of the world, must understand that it’s not about them, their rights, their honor and standing. The most important thing in life is not you; it’s the other guy.

*“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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”*

When it’s about you, you want fairness for you. When it’s about you, you want justice for you. When it’s about you, you deserve vengeance for you. When the most important thing in life is you and yours, protecting you and yours and looking out for your own interests is the rule. But Jesus says that when it’s about following Him, all of that is out the window.

And let’s not get distracted by imaginary scenarios about getting slapped or sued, forced to walk or give your stuff to folks who beg or borrow. Doing that is really just looking for excuses to get out from under what Jesus is saying here.

What Jesus is getting at is if his followers truly understand that the most important thing is not one's self, but others, even evil others, around one's self.

And I don't think we get it...or at least we really, really have to work hard at it. I mean think about it. How many of us are willing to be taken advantage of? How many of us are willing to give or to help, so long as the person we're helping gives us deference and respect? How many of us are willing to make ourselves low for someone else, but only just so low?

We're not. At some point we say, "Wait! That's enough! It's about me now!"

Knowing this about ourselves, this last part really stings. *"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 sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Jesus is talking to the people who are following Him. And where are they following Him? They don't really know it yet, but they are following Jesus to a restored relationship with the Father; to making peace with God—The God who loves perfectly and showers blessing on His enemies; the humanity that rejects Him.

He calls us to love so that "you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." But what does the Son of the Father—the most perfect and most important human being ever—what does He do?

I'll tell you what He doesn't do: Take care of His health, invest in His earthly relationships, install a positive view of Himself, live worldly purpose, values and dreams. No. He loves His enemies, prays for those persecuting Him, silently receives His beatings, is stripped of His tunic and gives all He has to give. For you. For me.

Only Jesus does His own Word perfectly. Only Jesus, the very Son of God, makes Himself the lowliest of all mankind in order to save His enemy, love His neighbor. In perfect obedience and faith to the Father, Jesus says "It's not about me. It's about them."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what's important in life?

The love of Jesus Christ is what is important in life; that He loved you so much to give His life to save your life. That you have been baptized into Christ and peace has been restored between you and your God of love. That in this gift of grace you stand an adopted son or daughter of the Father, made perfect as He is perfect. That in Christ you are enabled to be this same love to the world around you. The love of Christ is what is important in life, because it is life forever in Christ!

So the next time one of the many, many awful people in this world assaults your sensibilities and makes an affront to your standing and honor, don't get bent out of shape about how dare they because of who you are. Make a practice of remembering who you are in Christ, and be the lowly love that our Lord dared be for us. The truth is that you are in Christ, and that truth needs no rethinking. Rather, rethink the lie that this world and you in it is what's most important.

Love and life in Jesus is truth eternal, and it is yours. In Him, you be this truth—this love--to the world around you.

Amen.