

Pursue a Problem Savior
Feb. 13, 2008 ~ APCE San Diego

Matthew 5:33-48

Text: “You have heard that it was said. . . But I say to you. . .”

“You have *heard*.... but *I* say... You have heard...but I say... You have heard... but I say...” Do you notice the cadence of Jesus’ teaching? Conformity marches straight ahead, follows the sheep in front of us (a worn-out sweatshirt in our household says “Unless you’re the lead dog, the scenery never changes!”) But the rhythms of nonconformity keep turning our heads: look over here. But look over *here!*” It’s the very rhythm of the word we translate “repentance”-- that dandy Greek word *metanoia*, which means “turning again” or “turning around.”

This repentance is not a being sorry or a feeling guilty: it is a 180! Re-orienting yourself, embracing a change of scenery. Children do this to our conventional wisdom quite naturally. Recently, a first-grade school teacher gave each of her twenty-six students the first half of a well-known proverb and asked them to come up with the remainder of the saying. You know them well (or thought you did):

“Strike while the . . .” *bug is close.*

“Don’t bite the hand that. . .” *looks dirty.*

“Don’t put off till tomorrow what. . .” *you put on to go to bed.*

“You get out of something only what you. . .” *see in the picture on the box.*

And my personal favorite: “A bird in the hand. . .” *will poop on you.* (And, friends, you’ve just witnessed history in the making: the first time in all my preaching life that I’ve ever used the word “poop” in a sermon!)

Jesus himself reorients everything we thought we knew. “You have heard one thing,” he says, and in each case it was not a bad thing.

You’ve *heard* . . . a **good** thing: don’t swear falsely, but carry out the vows you make.

You have *heard*...a **wise** thing: Let retaliation for an injury be limited and fair.

You have *heard*...a **logical** thing: Be careful about who gets your loyalty and your love, and who doesn’t. Love your neighbor.

But it’s not enough. The **good** thing you’ve heard– to follow through on anything you swear to the Lord– is expanded and exceeded: “But I say,” Jesus adds: Don’t swear. Don’t try to distinguish yourself by the drama of your oaths.

The **wise** thing you’ve heard– an eye for an eye– was actually a call for clemency to go

beyond Israel's pagan neighbors who assigned no limits to their retaliation. But **this *exceeding* is exceeded**— and radically— by his “But *I* say”: rather than resisting, give an evildoer more than he wants!

Offer your other cheek to the striker,
 Give a cloak as well as a coat,
 go the second mile,
 don't question any panhandler about what he might do with
 your dollar bill.

The **logical** thing you've heard— love the one who deserves it and hate your enemy— that, too, is left in the dust. Go beyond level justice, by loving without condition.

Now, the thing to understand is that Jesus wasn't contradicting (or contravening) any of Moses' precepts, not somehow saying “That's old stuff— that's outmoded; we don't believe that any more.” When the Rabbis who were Jesus' peers used the phrase “But I say to you.” they meant “I'm building on the spirit of the commandment.” That's the way the Rabbis said it: “But I say to you... In other words, I'm expanding on this...”¹

This isn't something different; but something *more*.

Not what you've always thought about being a religious person; something *amplified*.

Just when you think you've got this Jesus thing nailed down... there's another loose board! In every case, he literally *outstrips* the fidelity of the most religious zealots of his day— and I dare say, of our day as well. He's counter-intuitive.

Pious vows are replaced: let your life be your argument;

Fair retaliation is replaced by unbalancing the equation the other way: volunteer to give more than is being robbed.

¹Gerard Sloyan: “Tons of ink have been spilled establishing that Jesus contravened the harshness of a half-dozen biblical commands, pitting Christianity against its parent Israel. Not so. Like the grain of sand in the oyster that is the irritant that makes the pearl, the teaching of the late first-century Pharisees as Matthew perceived it served as counterpoint for the Mosaic observance of the Jesus community.” *Preaching from the Lectionary: An Exegetical Commentary*, Gerard S. Sloyan. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 49-50.

Selective loving is replaced by cherishing *enemies*; and all this so that you will be a child who resembles your parentage... so that you will be evident as a “chip off the old block.” (“You look so familiar: of course! It’s because you *resemble* your mama.” Or “You *look like* your daddy.”)

We are to look like the problematic savior we’ve got on our hands here. In this case, it won’t do simply to be apprehended by this Hound of Heaven: you’ll need to pursue him. He’s perpetually dodging around the corners of our comfy old cultural assumptions, turning them on their heads and leaving their dust in his wake.

It’s true, isn’t it— that most of what we “have heard” is not even *religious* wisdom, but cultural assumption... And so the job of Christians is to translate the “you have heard” of our own day into Jesus’ kind of holy excess.

In these days, you have heard from your culture that immigrants should be suspect. But I say to you...the Christian is one who exceeds in the *other* direction, not only showing hospitality to the stranger but being open to receive the hospitality of the stranger’s gifts and graces.

You have heard— from your culture— that it’s justifiably righteous to lay on the horn when someone cuts you off at a stoplight. But I say to you... meet the arrogance of the perpetually hurried with sympathetic understanding.

We have heard from contemporary culture -- and sometimes taught our kids-- that being a believer should be a “cool” activity-- someone who takes no prisoners, so to speak. And then came a controversy last spring-- do you remember it?-- instigated by the cover of Presbyterian Outlook. Sporting a picture of a father and son in camouflage fatigues, holding authentic rifle-like arms, on an outing sponsored by a youth group, it was touting one church’s newest outreach to youth: a “paintball ministry.” The visual image was deeply shocking to many of us. But I’m here to say that APCE made me proud when Susan Penrod and Dianne Wright, and John Johnson and fifteen more of your presidents signed a letter to the editor that read in part, “we believe that when theory and practice are incongruent, the message a teacher hopes his or her student will grasp is harmed if not lost altogether. . . We urge [you] to. . . ask the hard questions that authentic Christian education based on the Word of God raises in the face of a culture of violence.”¹ It was an echo of Jesus’ unconventional Spirit, in these contemporary disciples’ voices.

It all brings us back to Romans 12:2. “Do not be conformed to this world; but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...” To **con/** form means to shape yourself *with*. Shape yourself *accordingly*. The old pair of pants that conforms itself to your shape? Very comfortable. The new pair? Not so much. But the old pair has holes in it; and it’s baggy, from

¹The Presbyterian Outlook May 14, 2007, 2ff.

conforming to your shape. **Trans-form**, on the other hand, begins with a root that means to go beyond– to exceed. And the goal of this life marked by excess? “...so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Perfect... there’s that word again, that Jesus uses as an identifying characteristic of his followers. It doesn’t mean “flawless” so much as *Shalom-hearted*.

What God says is to pursue the problem Savior: the one who rocks the boat, as all nonconforming thinkers and deeply ethical characters do; but he exceeds even these. It’s not a convenient way to live. It upsets the rhythms of society, where “you have heard...” “But **I** say...” Sisters and brothers, listen for that: listen for what God says-- in our most dangerous Book, in the Spirit voice that nags at your heart, in the model of his own living. “But **I** say...” Among all the voices clamoring around you, amidst all “you have heard...” -- listen for *that*.

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