

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 12, 2023

Radical Community Y'All

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

English can be a clunky language at times. I studied German when I attended a German boarding school in South Africa and came to appreciate the exactness of that language. Don't have quite the right word? Mash a couple of other words together and you're set. For instance, *krankenwagen*, which is the German word for ambulance is literally the two German words for sick ("*kranken*") and wagon ("*wagen*") put together. You don't call an ambulance in Berlin, you call a sick-wagon. The precision of the German language gives it greater clarity as well. Often in ways that I wish were present in English too.

I raise this issue of language because English does something of a disservice to scripture at times. Combine the clunkiness of the English language with a highly individualized culture, and we often find ourselves approaching texts like our Gospel reading today from the completely wrong direction. And that wrong approach leads us astray, further down the path of human values and priorities rather than being led further down the Way of Christ.

In this particular reading, the clunkiness of English shows itself in the pronoun usage in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Our English-language ears and our hyper-individual and consumerist culture tend to lead us to a very transactional reading of these verses. This results in many Americans hearing this teaching as an action-reward construct, especially since we're still in the chapter of Matthew that starts with all that talk of blessings in the beatitudes.

All of this leads many to hear this teaching as saying if you follow the Law you will be blessed, or at least avoid God's judgement and wrath. You can see, I trust, how this leads right to the heresy of works righteousness. All I have to do in order to be blessed is not murder, seek forgiveness, don't cheat, and be a person who keeps their word. But not only is this teaching of Jesus **not** about a transactional arrangement between an individual and God; it's really

about the sort of community Christ is trying to establish among the followers of His Way, it's about describing the Kingdom of God.

Many instances of the pronoun "you" in our reading today are plural, not singular. Here's where moving to the South provides great benefit, since we can use "y'all" to better indicate this reality. Though I will admit, it strikes me a bit funny to think of Jesus declaring from the side of a mountain, "Y'all have heard it said..." But the distinction is important! Jesus is teaching that His Way is a way of radical community. A way in which each individual centers the desires of God and the needs of others over and above themselves.

Jesus is teaching that the bare minimum, the stuff that's easy and comfortable, just isn't enough. Community is worth more than the bare minimum. Community is worth LOVE. And love means doing more than the least amount possible.

The Way of Christ leads to a community in which it's not enough to not harm others, but we don't even insult others since that harms the fabric of community. And when we do get angry, and we will since we're full and complete human beings who experience a wide range of emotions; we try to correctly direct that anger at behaviors and situations rather than at people.

Jesus then teaches that reconciliation with a neighbor is even more important than worshipping at the Temple. And in a preview of Matthew 18 we hear Christ urge his followers to deal directly with conflict and pursue reconciliation at every opportunity. Then, in an echo of the first of these antitheses, Jesus teaches that lust harms the fabric of community as much as anger can. Both lust and anger can cause us to reduce people to a label...to one aspect of themselves. And that, as I preached on last week, is the first step in dehumanizing others. And dehumanizing is deadly!

Then Jesus continues with teachings about maiming oneself rather than sinning against others and the community. I don't believe Jesus wants us to actually maim ourselves, of course, but I do think we're getting a sense of the seriousness with which Jesus wants us to take this teaching. Sin harms others...it harms community...it pains God. And trying to avoid those harms is worth our every effort.

Then we find a brief teaching on divorce and an acknowledgement that divorce causes harm as well (though I wish to be clear whenever we address divorce...sometimes the harm of divorce is worth it over the harm of

remaining in the relationship)¹. And then our reading ends with this business about not swearing on divine or human things and just being truthful and authentic people. Let your “Yes” be “Yes” and your “No” be “No.” Be trustworthy and honest. Two traits that greatly benefit life in community.

All of this describes followers of the Way who center community in their lives. Jesus is calling his followers, calling us, to live with great care and concern for others. Our action, and inaction, affects the world around us. What we do, say, and even think matters!

This teaching provides me with some comfort when the state of the world around me starts leading me to despair. As I look around at our world today, a world where transgender people are being targeted and there’s growing antisemitism. A world where our leaders care so little for us that we’ve become numb to tragedies like the chemical railcar explosion in East Palestine, PA and the incredibly broken systems that allowed the circumstances for that to happen to exist in the first place. When I dwell too long on the impending climate crisis, the lack of water in the Southwest and increasingly terrible tropical hurricanes...and our seeming disinterest in addressing these extinction-level issues...I am very tempted to despair.

And along comes Jesus. Jesus who reminds me that I can change these things. Yes, even the massively complex issues that threaten us today. We can make a difference...if we’re willing to center community. If we’re willing to Walk the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross. It is a way of sacrifice. It means doing what we can as every day disciples. It means lending our voices to those calling for justice. It means giving up some of our comforts so others might survive.

It also means being willing to be persecuted and mocked and knowing that we will find ourselves in conflict with the world around us. Walking the Way of Christ, centering community, means being taken advantage of at times. It can mean even suffering. But it also means profound blessing. It means deep and authentic connection. It means knowing that all life is cared for and nourished. It means participating in God’s creative and redemptive work in the world. And it all starts with setting aside the “I” and focusing on the “We.” Changing our “You” thinking to “Ya’ll” thinking.

¹ National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233

There's a great Zulu word that I'd like to teach you. In many ways it could almost be a stand in for the new Mission statement we recently adopted...quick quiz, without looking what is our new Mission Statement? That's right, Love God, Love People, Form Faith. Well, the Zulu word I'd like to teach you is "Ubuntu." It is usually translated as "I am because we are." It's a philosophy that centers community. And our Mission, to Love God, Love People, and Form Faith means exactly that...Ubuntu...centering community.

But don't just take my word for it, here's what one of my heroes says about Ubuntu, "A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, based from a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."²

This is how to change the world. This is how to redeem our broken systems. This is how to walk the Way of Christ. Ubuntu...community. Changing the "You" to "Y'All" as much as we can. And it starts with you and me. We can't change much...in the end we can only really change ourselves...but imagine if more and more of us changed in this way. What would happen to our world if more and more of us centered community, centered Christ. I'd like to try and find out...cause I have a sneaking suspicion we'd find ourselves in God's Kingdom. Amen.

² Tutu, Desmond (1999). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Image. ISBN 0-385-49690-7.