

Sermon on Matthew 5: 21-37
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Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
by Eric Fought

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. William Barber, architect of the Moral Mondays movement, and president of the North Carolina NAACP, often tells audiences when he speaks that he is a *conservative* Christian. The response from those gathered is often a bit of nervous laughter, as they know Barber as one who spoke—powerfully—at the Democratic National Convention this past summer; who led a march of 80,000 people throughout Raleigh yesterday and is; well, you know, one of those social justice types.

So, how does Barber define conservative Christian? He says, “I’m conservative if the definition of conservative means to hold on to, to preserve the essential nature of what we believe...then I’m a conservative.”

Barber then continues, “My bible tells me that love is what is at the center of what it means to be a Christian. My bible tells me that doing unto others as you would have them do unto you is essential to what it means to be a Christian. My bible tells me that helping the little ones and not despising the fatherless is the center of what it means to be a Christian.”

Perhaps we should all get some t-shirts that say, “conservative Christian” on them. We could make at least a few people do a double-take.

In this morning’s reading from Matthew’s gospel, we find Jesus teaching his disciples, having left the crowds after delivering what we have come to know as the Sermon on the Mount. And he focuses his teaching on the law, well, at least several aspects of the law of Moses.

“You may have heard that it was said...” and then he continues, “But I say to you...”

He does so, covering topics from murder to divorce to the swearing of oaths. But Jesus is not throwing out the law (as some have suggested) or questioning it, he is building upon it. Clarifying how to apply the law to one’s daily life.

He is even taking, shall we say, a conservative position.

But his focus in offering this teaching to his disciples is not to remind them of what the 10 commandments dictate—they are well aware—but Jesus is teaching them about how a community must apply those commandments in the course of daily life with one another.

After all, it was easy for people in the time of Jesus—and perhaps some of us today—to walk around believing that they are doing everything right as long as they don't break one or more of the 10 commandments.

But Jesus challenged that idea, pushing his disciples to see that, while they may not have committed murder, and gratefully so, the anger in their heart could be just as dangerous to themselves and the community around them.

So many of us grew up with an image of God and an understanding of God's law that affects how we read and hear passages like our first reading from Deuteronomy or our gospel reading this morning. We were taught that God was like Santa Clause—he knows when we are sleeping, he knows when we're awake. Yes, he knows if we've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake."

Aren't you glad I didn't sing?

But the good news is that the law that Jesus teaches about in Matthews gospel, and the law that God seeks us to follow is that of love. That love is expressed in the midst of a community. Notice that when Jesus teaches, he uses the word you. "You have heard, I say to you." That you is plural. He is addressing not individual disciples, but a community of men and women gathered together as followers of the way.

The law isn't about meeting our individual needs, but about creating and sustaining a community in which all of God's children can find nurture, health, safety, and blessing.

The logic behind the biblical focus on community is simple. When you're looking out for yourself, it's you against the world. When you look out for the others in your community, and they in turn look out for you, it's the community together that faces the challenges, setbacks, and opportunities the world offers.

Dr. Paul Brand, who devoted himself to eliminating leprosy, was once working alone in an attic when he came across some boxes of skeletons that had been dug up from a monastery. He remembered a lecture he heard, given by the anthropologist Margaret Mead, who spent much of her life researching prehistoric peoples. She asked her audience, "What is the earliest sign of civilization? A clay pot? Iron? Agriculture? Tools? No, she claimed, it was a healed leg bone.

Brand recalls:

She explained that such healings were never found in the remains of more competitive societies. There, clues of violence abounded: temples pierced by arrows, skulls crushed by clubs. But the healed femur showed that someone must have cared for the injured person—hunted on his behalf, brought him food, and served him at personal sacrifice. Other societies could not afford such pity.

My friends, there are a lot of people walking around with broken legs right now. The pain and the fear being carried by our brothers and our sisters—and by ourselves is staggering. We as church are called upon to respond.

Jesus taught his disciples that anger is the root of evil, which can lead to murder. Lust can lead to an end of a relationship. Today, I say to you, lust for power has led our country into a constitutional crisis. Today, I say to you, fear of the other and racism (let's name it) has led to a ban and a wall.

I haven't been with you for a while, but I know that you have been responding. I know that you have chosen to be a place of sanctuary, and that you have provided space for other congregations around Minnesota to come and discern that path. I know that you hung a banner high, telling neighbors and others who drive down Dale Street that Lutheran Church of the Redeemer is a place of welcome to immigrants and refugees. I know that you stood strong on behalf of the water protectors in Standing Rock. Your pastor has been on the front lines all over the state, standing up for the immigrant community, leading prayer and preaching in the public square, challenging corporations and calling out bad actors.

And I'm sure I'm missing so much more that you all have done together as a community in recent weeks and months. In short, you have done what you have always done, and I'm sure you will do even more in the future.

After all, that's the only way God's law of love gets through the noise, the pain and the fear. It's through us. It's through you.

The Quaker leader and author Rufus Jones wrote:

The primary function of a church, if it is to be the continuing body of Christ in the world, is to raise human life out of its secular drift and to give reality to the eternal here in the midst of time. When it ceases to bear witness to the real presence of an eternal reality operating in and upon our lives, its race is run, it has missed its mission. But just as certainly the church is commissioned as the organ of the Spirit to bring health and healing to our human lives and to the social order in which our lives are formed and molded.

My brothers and sister in Christ, let us be that church.

Amen.