

“Promises to Keep”

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I Corinthians 13:1-13

Matthew 5:21-48

[The Apostle Paul said,]

‘Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;
it is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.’

I Cor. 13:4-6

Let us pray... O God,

Help us always to be a safe church – a sacred place
that reflects the sacred places of our own hearts.

Amen

This part of the Sermon on the Mount could be called

“Instructions For A Safe Church” – or for that matter,
how any environment like the work place or even the home
can and should be safeguarded.

That’s not just in regard to lurid scandals,

but in the inconsiderate ways we communicate with each other
and treat each other often without realizing it.

It is sad to learn how much dysfunction there is in such institutions
where trust has been expected.

It seems amazing that the more we’ve heard about
abuse of one form or another, it still seems to occur frequently.

Then again we can be overly concerned about causing offense
and self-conscious to the point of ‘politically correct’ paranoia.

We may long for simpler times,

but maybe that was only when ignorance was bliss –
and that it has always been tough for somebody.

Using the phrase, ‘You have heard that it was said...’,

Jesus reinterprets various commandments and teachings
from the Jewish tradition,

for the most part to expand on how they should be applied.

Jesus challenged not only the people of his day, but all people ever since,
to live by ‘the harder right instead of the easier wrong’

which is a quote from ‘The Cadet Prayer’ of West Point.

Willard, p.2

In fact, lessons learned from that particular institution especially when women were first admitted to the military academies, continues to serve me as a guide about what constitutes appropriate behavior – as much by bad examples as good.

To say that West Point was one of the last bastions of male chauvinism would be accurate.

I'm not sure what the statistics are for how many marriages of cadet graduates end in divorce, but I wouldn't be surprised if it were exceptionally high.

But with regard to treatment of women as fellow cadets – as co-workers sharing the same barracks, though not wash facilities, I think the US Military Academy did a good job initially.

Simple things like keeping a door open when counseling a person of the opposite sex – allowed for confidentiality but at the same time, protection from abuse.

Of course in a church community that is 'open & affirming', the standard of leaving the door open has to be applied for everybody the pastor meets with in a counseling situation.

And with the end of 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, the military also has to be sensitive to that broader application.

There is always a level of risk that must be compensated for by finding a level of trust based on mutuality and respect – a practical loving-kindness.

Even the military has to try to become a 'beloved community' in order to be effectively functional.

And I expect that whatever your experience has been in your career or social activities that the dynamics for a healthy environment are the same.

Murder, sexual abuse, adultery, bullying, fraud, ethnic hatred and all other forms of human injustice were no less a problem in Jesus' day, and these are addressed in his teachings.

Though we are sinners, Jesus nevertheless has the expectation that we can behave differently.

Notice that he talks about change beginning with overt behaviors and working toward inward attitudes.

For example, the consequence of nursing a grudge is the same for murder and hell is the reward for people who make a habit of insulting others.

So, we need to think twice before calling somebody a knucklehead!

Willard, p.3

I always wondered how ultra-conservative fundamentalists
could insist on a literal interpretation of the Bible
but not have an opinion about
the tearing out of eyes and cutting off of hands that offend.
But it seems that Jesus was saying we need to guard ourselves
from the kind of 'looking at' that objectifies a person
without actually 'seeing' them.

Now, the Muslims have a convenient rule
that allows for when a cute person walks by,
you can look twice, but no more after that –
except that I think their rule only applies to
men who are doing the checking out...

The basic idea still applies,
be the custodian of what you give your attention to in life.
Humility, in this way, is the safer course,
but also the nobler one that we expect of ladies & gentlemen alike.

I found interpreting Jesus' teaching about divorce
to be difficult for a society where, unfortunately,
divorce is a common reality for many of us.
So, I had to paraphrase to get at what I think Jesus was emphasizing –
that women in traditional societies are at a disadvantage
when divorced, along with their children.
To some extent that is still true in American society,
though not in quite the same way thanks to our progressive laws.

The main thing Jesus seemed to be getting at was to urge men
to make protecting the vulnerable – that is to say, women, a priority.
So, neither keeping the nuclear family intact
nor discarding others when the relationship is inconvenient
are favored options –
but what is best under the circumstances for the 'least of these'?

Oaths and contracts, prenuptial agreements, deeds, etc. and so forth
seems to be necessary prerequisites for business in this world.
But Jesus was more concerned about truth telling that arises
from within oneself that must begin by taking responsibility
for one's actions.
So, the only promise we can really keep is to be honest with ourselves.

Willard, p.4

Like the Golden Rule, most cultures have some form of 'lex talionis' – that is to say, 'an eye for an eye'.

It is supposed to be a limit on retribution which too easily spills over into vengeance and blood feuds like the proverbial Hatfields & McCoys.

But how often do we carry a grudge passed remembering what it was all about in the first place?

Women who have survived an abusive relationship with men cannot readily accept "turning the other cheek".

For such women,

Jesus' example needs to be understood as a metaphor along the lines of what theologian Walter Wink suggests.

He says there is a 'third way' of responding to abuse by using creativity instead of violence.

To 'turn the other cheek' is to do something proactive in order to place the abuser at a costly disadvantage with the law.

Jesus' other examples = that follow this one, of shaming an antagonist and winning over an enemy through generosity are consistent with this 'third way' of nonviolent direct action evident in what's happening in Egypt and Tunisia as well as the historical examples of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the civil rights movement in our country, and the struggle for India's independence.

And that works at the micro level, too, in the everyday struggles at work, at school, at church, and at home.

This portion of The Sermon on the Mount ends as it began – with love.

Once again, Jesus knocks us over metaphorically speaking with something outrageously simple and noble, turning the world upside down – no doubt with a sly wink as he tells us to love our enemies!

Martin Luther King said we don't have to love everybody, but we have to love them.

And when you think about it, it really is possible to do – though there needs to be some conditions in place.

Jesus teaches us through The Sermon on the Mount that we are to be transformed from the inside out – and as it has been demonstrated in history and current events, this leads to social transformation.

Willard, p.5

Primarily that means a commitment to help protect each other –
being sensitive not to place others in compromising situations,
to speak up when you feel uncomfortable,
and be patient as we seek the perfection of becoming
a ‘beloved community’ that is truly ‘open and affirming’.

In the meantime,

it can be pretty scary territory

as we venture out from old stereotypes and privileges
to find the sensitivity that is required for mutuality and respect.

It was at a storyteller festival workshop where I heard Jay O’Callahan say,
‘It is not the darkness that we fear within us, but the light.’

I think what that means is that

we prefer the darkness of ignorance to the light of liberation
because we don’t want to be disappointed.

But love is what holds things together –

and we all need to hear that we are loved.

Though it’d be nice if everyone was able to find their true love in this world,
there is a broad spectrum of ways to express love appropriately
to remind yourself and others that God loves you.

And Jay O’Callahan concluded his workshop by having everyone form a circle,
arm in arm, looking around at each other –

except when you needed to tear your eyes away,
and he got everybody to sing this song:

Let me call you sweetheart; I’m in love with you.

Let me hear you whisper that you love me too.

Keep the lovelight glowing in your eyes so blue.

Let me call you sweetheart; I’m in love with you.

Amen

Our scripture lesson today is a familiar one.

*I Corinthians 13:1-13 is often called "The Love Chapter"
and describes the character of God's unconditional,
yet uncompromising love for us.*

- [1] If I speak in the tongues of [humankind] and of angels,
but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
- [2] And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but have not love, I am nothing.
- [3] If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned,
but have not love, I gain nothing.
- [4] Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;
[5] it is not arrogant or rude.
Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;
[6] it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.
- [7] Love bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.
- [8] Love never ends;
as for prophecies,
they will pass away;
as for tongues,
they will cease;
as for knowledge,
it will pass away.
- [9] For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect;
[10] but when the perfect comes,
the imperfect will pass away.
- [11] When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child,
I reasoned like a child;
when I became [an adult], I gave up childish ways.
- [12] For now we see in a mirror dimly,
but then [someday] face to face.
Now I know in part;
then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.
- [13] So faith, hope, love abide, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.

Matthew 5:21-48 [NRSV]

21 ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,
“You shall not murder”; and
“whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.”

22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,
you will be liable to judgement;
and if you insult a brother or sister,
you will be liable to the council;
and if you say, “You fool”,
you will be liable to the hell of fire.

23So when you are offering your gift at the altar,
if you remember that your brother or sister
has something against you,

24leave your gift there before the altar and go;
first be reconciled to your brother or sister,
and then come and offer your gift.

25Come to terms quickly with your accuser
while you are on the way to court with him,
or your accuser may hand you over to the judge,
and the judge to the guard,
and you will be thrown into prison.

26Truly I tell you, you will never get out
until you have paid the last penny.

27 ‘You have heard that it was said,
“You shall not commit adultery.”

28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

29If your right eye causes you to sin,
tear it out and throw it away;
it is better for you to lose one of your members
than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

30And if your right hand causes you to sin,
cut it off and throw it away;
it is better for you to lose one of your members
than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 ‘It was also said,
“Whoever divorces his wife,
let him give her a certificate of divorce.”

32But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife,
except on the ground of unchastity,
causes her to commit adultery;
and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 'Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,
"You shall not swear falsely,
but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord."

34But I say to you, Do not swear at all,
either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,
35or by the earth, for it is his footstool,
or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

36And do not swear by your head,
for you cannot make one hair white or black.
37Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No";
anything more than this comes from the evil one.

38 'You have heard that it was said,
"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

39But I say to you,
Do not resist an evildoer.
But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,
turn the other also;
40and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat,
give your cloak as well;
41and if anyone forces you to go one mile,
go also the second mile.
42Give to everyone who begs from you,
and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 'You have heard that it was said,
"You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy."

44But I say to you, Love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you,
45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;
for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?
Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?

47And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,
what more are you doing than others?
Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

48Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

**“YOU HEARD IT WAS SAID TO THE ANCIENT ONES,
‘THOU SHALT NOT MURDER’ AND
‘MURDERERS WILL BE BROUGHT TO COURT’.
BUT I SAY TO YOU,
ANYONE WHO FESTERS WITH ANGER
AGAINST SOMEONE WILL BE BROUGHT TO COURT.
AND WHOEVER CALLS SOMEONE BY A DIRTY NAME
WILL FIND THEMSELVES IN PRISON.
AND WHOEVER CASUALLY SLIGHTS SOMEONE
IS ALREADY IN HELL.
SO, BEFORE YOU BRING AN OFFERING TO GOD
WHILE YOU ARE NURSING A GRIEVANCE, LEAVE YOUR GIFT,
RECONCILE YOURSELF WITH THAT PERSON,
THEN RETURN TO PRESENT YOUR OFFERING.**

**IF YOU GET INTO A BUSINESS DISPUTE,
BE ON GOOD TERMS WITH YOUR ANTAGONIST,
OTHERWISE YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF IN COURT,
AND THE JUDGE HANDING YOU OVER TO THE SHERIFF
AND DOING TIME IN PRISON.
I AM TELLING YOU THE TRUTH,
THE WORLD WON’T LET YOU GET AWAY
WITHOUT PAYING OFF ALL THAT YOU OWE.**

YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID,
‘THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’.
BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT ANYONE WHO
LOOKS UPON A PERSON WITH LUST
HAS ALREADY COMMITTED ADULTERY
AGAINST THAT PERSON IN ONE’S HEART.

NOW, IF YOUR ‘RIGHTEOUS’ EYE CAUSES YOU TO SIN,
TEAR IT AWAY AND CAST YOUR SIGHT DOWN.
FOR IT IS BETTER NOT TO BE A SPECTATOR
THAN TO BECOME A SPECTACLE YOURSELF.

AND IF YOUR ‘RIGHTEOUS’ HAND CAUSES YOU TO SIN,
PULL IT AWAY AND KEEP YOUR DISTANCE.
FOR IT WOULD BE BETTER TO
KEEP YOUR HANDS TO YOURSELF
THAN FOR OTHERS TO SEIZE YOU.

AND IT HAS BEEN SAID,
‘WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE,
LET HIM BE AUTHORIZED TO DO SO.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT,
ANY MAN WHO DIVORCES HIS WIFE –
EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL DISLOYALTY,
PUTS THAT WOMAN AT RISK IN SOCIETY.
FOR THERE IS UNFAIR SOCIAL PRESSURE
AGAINST A DIVORCED WOMAN IN THIS WORLD.

AGAIN, YOU HAVE HEARD IT WAS SAID TO THE ANCIENT ONES,
‘THOU SHALT NOT BREAK THY WORD’, AND
‘THOU SHALT HONOR THY PLEDGE TO THE LORD.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU,
DON’T MAKE PROMISES AT ALL.
NEITHER BY HEAVEN WHICH IS THE THRONE OF GOD,
NOR BY EARTH WHICH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF GOD,
NOT BY JERUSALEM THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING,
NOR BY THE HAIRS OF YOUR OWN HEAD
COULD YOU PRESUME TO PROMISE ANYTHING.
FOR IT IS NOT YOU IN THE FIRST PLACE
WHO COULD TURN EVEN A BLACK HAIR, WHITE.

BUT SAY, ‘YES’ OR ‘NO’ ABOUT WHAT YOU DID DO;
FOR BEYOND THIS, IT IS QUIBBLING.

YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID,
‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU,
DON’T HIT YOUR ABUSER BACK – WITH VIOLENCE...
IF SOMEONE BACKHANDS THE RIGHT SIDE OF YOUR FACE,
TURN SO THEY’D HAVE TO STRIKE THE LEFT SIDE –
AND RISK BEING GUILTY OF ASSAULT.

AND IF SOMEONE SUES YOU
FOR THE SHIRT OFF YOUR BACK,
EMBARRASS THEM WITH YOUR NAKEDNESS
BY OFFERING YOUR CLOAK, TOO.

AND IF A ROMAN SOLDIER FORCES YOU
TO CARRY HIS PACK FOR A MILE –
GO TWO MILES AND MAKE A FRIEND.

ANYTIME SOMEONE ASKS YOU
TO GIVE THEM SOMETHING,
OR TO BORROW SOMETHING,
DON’T TURN YOUR BACK ON THEM.

YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID,
‘THOU SHALT LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR’ AND
‘THOU SHALT HATE THY ENEMY.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU,
LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND
PRAY FOR THOSE WHO MISTREAT YOU,
SO THAT YOU MAY BECOME
CHILDREN OF YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN.
FOR GOD HAS MADE
THE SUN TO SHINE UPON THE EVIL
AND THE GOOD;
THE RAIN TO FALL UPON THE JUST
AND THE UNJUST.

SO, IF YOU LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE YOU,
ISN'T THAT ITS OWN REWARD?
EVEN THIEVES AND TRAITORS DO THIS.
AND IF YOU ONLY WELCOME THOSE WHO ARE LIKE YOU
WHAT WOULD BE NOBLE ABOUT THAT?
YET, ISN'T THIS WHAT THE EXTREMISTS DO?
INSTEAD, PERFECT YOURSELF IN THIS WAY –
BY PRACTICING GOD'S PERFECT WAY
OF LOVING-KINDNESS.