

## “The 3 Point Sermon on the Mount”

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Thank you for the privilege of preaching here at UCC in Canton  
and for the opportunity to do Biblical storytelling with you this morning.  
I am excited to be in a church of my home denomination,  
the United Church of Christ.  
And Canton is a very special place for me in both  
sentimental and spiritual ways.

My father’s parents, Louis & Dorothy Willard – my grandparents,  
had lived on Pleasant Circle, just a few miles from here.  
Their neighbors then were a young family named the Pratts –  
Mike & Janet and their children Ralph, Joel, Susan, and Jeffrey.  
I loved our visits when my folks would drive us up from NJ  
to visit my grandparents and to see my friend Joel –  
whom I have known since we were six.

Canton is still special to me as a magic, enchanted place,  
a sacred space of imagination, inspiration, and refuge for me.  
My grandparents have long since passed on and are buried in Knollwood,  
and the Pratts moved away from Pleasant Circle to –  
right next door here, where they’ve lived more than 40 years.

This morning you heard me do some Biblical storytelling –  
Matthew chapters 5-7, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.  
Since 1987 when I was a seminarian at Lancaster Theological Seminary,  
I have been experimenting with how to tell Bible stories  
in ways that bring them to life.

At first, I would recite them directly from an approved translation  
like the Revised Standard Version or the King James Bible,  
but after a while, I began to translate and paraphrase  
the stories I tell.  
Using a Greek-English dictionary, I would get the root meanings of words,  
then string them back together like a pearl necklace,  
polishing them over time with each telling and paraphrasing  
using my own words to express what I feel the message is about.  
For this set of stories I used an “interlinear” which is a shortcut for getting  
root word meanings, allowing me to paraphrase directly.

Willard, p.2

I try to unpack labels we take for granted – like ‘the Son of Man’  
which I interpret as ‘the true Heir of Humanity’.

Another example is ‘the Kingdom of God’ or ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’,  
which I refer to as ‘the Beloved Community’ –

a term from the Civil Rights-era which represents  
“a social reality that is possible ‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’.”

Fr. Edward Sanders is a Jesuit priest who taught spiritual direction  
at my seminary and he encouraged my interest for storytelling, saying,  
“Be aware of the stories that come to you to tell.”

And I found that those early stories – which came from each of the Gospels,  
followed a theme and that together, they told of the beginnings  
of Jesus’ ministry as a healer, teacher, and wonderworker.

That particular set of stories concludes with Jesus’ teachings called  
the Beatitudes – and that’s where The Sermon on the Mount begins.

The Beatitudes – or the Be-attitudes, actually form a cyclic pattern  
illustrating the life journey of someone who is in Christ.

At some point we can find ourselves challenged by life to suffer, to be humbled,  
to hunger and thirst for justice, to seek mercy, purity, and peace.

When I first did my translation of this material,  
I used the phrase “Happy are those who are poor...”  
instead of “Blessed are the poor...”

Shelby Rooks, former Executive Minister  
of the UCC Board of Homeland Ministries heard me tell those stories  
at my home church, Plainfield Congregational UCC, NJ  
which was his church as well and he said,  
‘To be blessed is not always to be happy.’

Ain’t it the truth! So I changed this phrase to – “To be honored...”  
as in, “To be worthy of respect...”

So, the Beatitudes are the introduction to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount  
and there actually are three points to this sermon –  
which is a classic format for sermons and essays.

Here are the three points I have been able to pick out:

*You have heard that it was said ‘One Way’, but I say to you,  
‘God is still speaking’.*

*So, don’t pray, donate serve just for show  
for God is with you wherever you go.*

*Therefore, do unto others as you would have them do unto you –  
or else.*

Willard, p.3

*You have heard that it was said 'One Way', but I say to you,  
'God is still speaking'.*

In this first part of the sermon,

Jesus expands on some of the 10 Commandments  
as well as the Great Commandment to love others.

At the outset, he assures us he is not trying to undermine the tradition,  
but to affirm it by going beyond a life of conformity to living  
an authentic life, now – essentially, what 'eternal life' means.

He uses the phrase, 'You have heard that it was said...'

to describe the usual interpretation, then he adds, 'but I say to you...'  
and expands on the spirit of the law – like 'Love your enemies.'

*So, don't pray, donate serve just for show  
for God is with you wherever you go.*

In this second part, Jesus expands on this idea of those "religious experts"  
who make a big show of their religion in the public,  
but are really hypocrites.

Jesus was reminding us that God is a living being  
and we should live like God really is with us and involved in our world.

And we need to make room for God by controlling our anger,  
praying with expectation that we will get the help we need,  
and to 'fast' which is another way of saying  
"to work hard" in the process.

And also, that worry does no good, but we are to trust God will provide.

*Therefore, do unto others as you would have them do unto you –  
or else.*

The Sermon on the Mount ends with a downer in this third part –  
not everybody who says, 'Lord, Lord' will find favor,  
but only those who do the will of God.

Jesus wanted to comfort the afflicted  
and afflict the comfortable – getting people to think.

Hypocritical behavior, wolfishness in sheep's clothing, and  
behavior like hyenas and swine is not going to cut it.

It's not enough to just believe or be a card-carrying 'Christian',  
we have to allow the Holy Spirit of love –

as in loving-kindness or compassion to be at work in our lives.

So, the high point of the Sermon on the Mount is the Golden Rule –  
'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'

This idea can be found in all the great religions – and that includes Islam.

Willard, p.4

A few years back, a federal judge was removed from his office because of his insistence on the public display of The 10 Commandments in defiance of the separation of church and state.

What if he had promoted The Sermon on the Mount instead?

There's the stuff of revolution and the transformation of societies!

In the 1800s, there was a culture clash in America between abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates that erupted into the Civil War, both sides being justified by their interpretations of the Bible – a conflict between the letter and the spirit of the law.

The state of Massachusetts responded with a regiment that included free African-Americans immortalized in the statue in The Commons and the film, "Glory".

During this era, the Russian author Leo Tolstoy was writing his great novels as well as a book called The Kingdom of God – in which he adopted a radical position of non-violence that was to be an influence on a young Hindu lawyer named Mohandas Gandhi.

Gandhi would eventually emerge to lead a movement of radical non-violent, direct action to confront an Empire and achieve national freedom of self-determination for India and Pakistan.

Gandhi's example in turn would inspire Martin Luther King Jr. and his work against the lingering oppression of slavery in America.

The common thread between them all was the words of Jesus of Nazareth spoken in a sermon on a mountain-top in Israel 2,000 years ago.

The work of Christ the Liberator is unfinished, but the blueprint for the beloved community of God's Kingdom has been there for each generation ever since to work out on their own terms.

Throughout its history, the United Church of Christ has taken on challenges for the transformation of society.

And that was true right from the beginning when Pastor John Robinson blessed those first Pilgrims as they went forth into the New World with words to this effect: "I am convinced there is more light to break forth from God's holy word."

With every generation, we have to re-interpret these words to learn how God is still speaking in our time to hold us responsible to one another to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' – to love, or else.

Amen