

“The Sermon on The Mount”

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UCC at The Villages
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Exodus 34:1-9

Matthew 5-7

‘The Lord said to Moses...

‘Be ready in the morning, and come up... to Mount Sinai
and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain.

No one shall come up with you... Ex. 34:1a, 2-3a

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for calling us all to come up to ‘the top of the mountain’
where we can talk to you anytime, anywhere, and about anything.

Amen

Thank you for patiently listening to this extended scripture lesson.

You’ve given me a chance to express my faith through my art.

Creativity as faith expression is something I hope the UCC at The Villages
will be known for – encouraging people to serve God and their neighbor
by sharing their gift.

A few years back, a federal judge was removed from his office
because of he insisted 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?

Now 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.

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 the British Empire and achieve
national freedom and 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 – Christ the Liberator,
spoken in a sermon on a mountain-top in Israel 2,000 years ago.

Willard, p.2

And The Sermon on the Mount is in the form of a classic ‘three point sermon’,
*You’ve 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,
because God is with you wherever you go.*
*Therefore, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ –
or else.*

Jesus begins with the Beatitudes – or the Be-attitudes,
which form a cyclic pattern illustrating the life journey
of someone who is ‘in Christ’.

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

Then he makes his first point: It’s not enough to serve the letter of the Law,
but to enter into dialogue with it.

There’s no ‘One Way’ to interpret the Word of God,
but that ‘God is still speaking’ and we are expected to adapt these words
to cope with the unique circumstances of our time.

There was a period in our Church’s history
when Christians were burned at the stake for translating the Bible
into language everyone could understand and not just the priests.

And that tension between literalists and reformers
is right there in Jesus’ sermon as he does some re-interpreting himself,
assuring us he’s not trying to undermine the Law –but fulfill it.

Using this stylized phrase: ‘You’ve heard that it was said... , but I say to you...’
Jesus reinterprets two of the 10 Commandments
as well as ‘lex talionis’ – otherwise known as ‘an eye for an eye...’
and other laws about divorce and oath-taking.
Even the Great Commandment itself is expanded to include
‘love your enemies’.

My interpretation was done as a paraphrase
taking root word meanings and using synonyms
to create a new text that is still recognizable.

But sometimes I departed entirely from the text
to get at the sense or ‘spirit’ of the message –
an example being Jesus’ teaching about divorce.

Willard, p.3

I expect his emphasis on maintaining a marriage
was not simple compliance with an external law,
but because of the vulnerability of divorced women
in traditional societies.

Though it seems American society is no longer so troubled
by the stigma of divorce – yet women and children are still vulnerable.

Jesus' second point is tied to the first –
don't just go through the motions of praying, donating, and serving
for show, because God is with us wherever we go.

God is present –even when we are not aware of this.

God is a living being and we need to act like it –
but not in a superficial way that plays for show
to impress others.

Rather it is in recognizing that God knows what we need –
like food, clothing, shelter, companionship and we need only
seek the Kingdom or as I call it – using the civil rights-era term,
'beloved community', that these things will get taken care of.

This kind of Christian belief makes the bridge from spiritual mysticism
to social activism – from 'faith' to 'works'.

The third point is that the sum of the Law of Moses and the prophets' teaching
is what the world generally knows as the Golden Rule –
and what Christians call the Great Commandment
to love God and your neighbor as you would be loved yourself.

And that is at the heart of Jesus' message in his Sermon on the Mount.

But there are consequences to not following the 'One Way' of love –
hyena-like irreverence, swinish contempt, and wolfish treachery
will have no place in the Kingdom to come.

Jesus ends his sermon on kind of a downer with the parable of
building your house on rock or sand.

But as usual, he is trying to make his message stay in the minds of his listeners
and not just spin the party line of tradition.

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

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

Willard, p.4

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

*In our lesson today from Exodus 34:1-9,
God instructs Moses to climb Mt Sinai
and receive the 10 Commandments
on a new set of stone tablets.*

*Moses had destroyed the first set of tablets out of anger
when he found the people worshiping a golden idol
in his absence.*

34:1 The Lord said to Moses,

‘Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones,
and I will write on the tablets the words
that were on the former tablets,
which you broke.

2Be ready in the morning,
and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai
and present yourself there to me,
on the top of the mountain.

3No one shall come up with you,
and do not let anyone be seen
throughout all the mountain;
and do not let flocks or herds
graze in front of that mountain.’

4So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones;
and he rose early in the morning
and went up on Mount Sinai,
as the Lord had commanded him,
and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.

5The Lord descended in the cloud
and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name,
‘The Lord.’

6The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,
‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding
in steadfast love and faithfulness,
7 keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,

but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation.'

8And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth,
and worshipped.

9He said,

'If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord,

I pray, let the Lord go with us.

Although this is a stiff-necked people,

pardon our iniquity and our sin,

and take us for your inheritance.'