

Stanford Memorial Church
February 16, 2014

RULES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Psalter Lesson: Psalm 119.1-8
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 5.21-37

As most of you know, here at Memorial Church the scripture lessons to each Sunday worship service are designated by what we call “a lectionary.” What you may not know is that this is a fairly ancient practice. According to the Jewish Talmud, the reading of appointed scriptures goes back at least to the time of Moses. And the goal of the lectionary was to ensure that all the designated Jewish scriptures would be read in the course of one year. In this sense there is a certain discipline to the practice. If nothing else, this prevented the speaker from “cherry-picking” or selecting favorites as well as ignoring those that were not so inspiring or might make you wonder, “how did this section even get in our sacred writings in the first place?”

In the Jewish tradition the lectionary readings were distributed over a one year or a three year practice. This one or three year option is also characteristic of the Christian lectionaries. But the most common practice in the Christian tradition today is to follow a three-year cycle lectionary and they are referred to as A, B, and C. Each gospel is assigned to one of the years, with Matthew being A, Mark is B, and Luke is C. You might ask, “Well what happened to the gospel of John?” And the answer is that passages from the gospel of John are selected primarily during the Easter season. So if a minister is following the lectionary, you are not likely to hear many readings from the fourth gospel during the summer, fall, and late winter months.

For centuries the use of a lectionary has separated the traditionalists from the non-traditionalists. For the traditionalists (Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists) following the lectionary is a good discipline, it ensures that the entire body of inspired scripture is read and interpreted. If the passage strikes us as a bit less inspiring or out-of-date, well this is a good discipline for the interpreter to reflect on the material and perhaps gain some new insights. The non-traditionalists (Baptists, Evangelicals, various sects), on the other hand, essentially say, “No way.” Following a schedule of prescribed readings, put together centuries ago, even if they tried to make the Old and New Testaments complement one another, stifles the spirit. Or maybe there is a need within the congregation or the community that needs to be addressed, such as discrimination or failing to care for those less fortunate than ourselves. Or I wonder what Martin Luther King would have done if he had today’s scripture lesson for his “I Have a Dream” speech.

Ordinarily when I review the scripture assigned for the Sunday I am scheduled to speak, several thoughts go through my mind: hopefully, it will be fairly familiar, so that the listeners can identify with it a bit more easily; it would also be helpful if there is some kind of interaction, especially between Jesus and another individual or individuals who might be

asking a question such as, “who is my neighbor?”; and, in the best of all worlds, I might be able to put a new twist or spin on a familiar story—like the commentator who pointed out, “The story of the prodigal son should really should be called the story of the prodigal father—for it is the father (like God) who extends forgiveness and love beyond expectation.” Well, sad to say, these nice expectations and hopes went down the proverbial drain when I reviewed the passage from Matthew assigned for today, which I just read. Almost instantaneously I found myself asking, “my lord, what in the world do I do with this? . . . and, maybe I should join the non-traditionalists, throw the lectionary out the window and go with a safer old standby, like the prodigal son—or father. But no, like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*,” an inner voice kept repeating, “tradition, tradition.”

The first reaction I had, and still have, is that it is hard for me to believe that these words constitute a true verbatim record of what Jesus actually said, as they strike me as extremely judgmental and harsh. As an example: what does it mean when Jesus is purported to have said, “if you insult your brother or sister, you will be liable to the council.” In point of fact, there was no council to whom a follower of Jesus would make an appeal; at this time the disciples of Jesus consisted of little more than a handful of individuals, and the followers of Jesus were yet to be organized into a community of faith. And how in the world is it possible to deliver a sermon on these “Thou shalt not” condemnations without sounding like the notorious Puritan Jonathon Edwards preaching his famous, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God?”

Then I began to think about the fact that biblical scholars agree the words of Jesus as well as the stories about him were originally circulated as oral tradition, usually shared at meetings in the homes of the followers of Jesus, or, as they often called themselves, followers of the way.” And as these men and women shared the “good news,” not only were they concentrating on how to avoid persecution from the some of the Jewish authorities as well as the Romans, but they also appeared to strongly believe that Jesus would return in just a few years. So writing down accounts of the words and stories of Jesus was not seen as an urgent need and might have occurred some 30 years after his death. 60 to 90 years seems more realistic.

If Matthew, the disciple of Jesus, wrote or provided the material for the gospel that bears his name, it is generally believed that he was writing primarily to a Jewish audience. And at this point in their history, they had become extremely legalistic. Laws appeared to be piled on top of laws: what could or could not be eaten and on what days, how far they could travel on the Sabbath, who they could talk to and who they should avoid, and on and on. Small wonder that Jesus, at times, either chided or ridiculed them for their excessive legalism. On many of these occasions Matthew the disciple had to be present. At times, I suspect, Matthew’s reputation may have preceded him since, according to tradition he had formally been a tax collector. And it was said that tax collectors were not allowed to testify in court as it was known they were totally dishonest. Well if that description of a tax collector is accurate, then I suggest that he has gone to the other extreme in setting down a list of dos and don’ts that would equal, or maybe excel, the legalism of the Jews at his time.

So lets take a look at some of the guidelines—or rules-- he gives us for living the Christian life. I have no doubt in my mind that everyone in this room would agree with the very first “Thou shall not,” when he says, “You shall not murder.”

Actually, Matthew was giving a guideline which represented an advance in the understanding of crime and punishment. Up until this time the practice for responding to any severe crime was one attributed to the renowned Babylonian ruler, Hammurabi in 1772 BCE, usually referred to as the Lex Taliones code. The Lex Taliones code is quite concise and easily understood and is translated as “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” A direct connection was made between the crime and the punishment: if you poke out my eye, then I poke out your eye. I suspect, however, that a little contextual ethics was involved in the actual application of the Lex Taliones, as I imagine a slave whose eye has been poked out by his master would never dream being justified in reciprocating and poking out his master’s eye. While the Lex Taliones represented an advance in the field of assessing a crime and then designating an appropriate punishment, it still left much to be desired. As Martin Lutheran sagely observed, “The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind.” And Tevye the beleaguered father in *Fiddler on the Roof* trying to raise three modern daughters remarked if we instituted an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, “Then the whole world would be blind and toothless.”

In point of fact, Matthew actually presents a more enlightened understanding by reminding us to consider the feelings of anger that sometimes prod people to commit something as unthinkable as murder. But what about those instances when anger seems the only appropriate response? Jesus was certainly angry at the money changers in the temple, when he denounced them and drove them out with a whip. Or if I read, as I did this past week, about a youth minister sexually abusing the youth that he or she was hired to care for and serve as a model of faith, then I am angry and think it would be inappropriate not to be angry. Interestingly enough anger often occurs in somewhat unexpected ways among patients in the hospital. Many assume the chaplain serves patients and family members in the hospital in order to give them a sense of peace and comfort. And very often this is the case. A nurse may say to be, “Oh, Chaplain Fitzgerald, you have to call on Mr. Jones in room 754. He is such a nice person and regularly reads his Bible as well as praying for others and himself.” So I call and have a delightful time talking with Mr. Jones, frequently ending our conversation with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the comfort care Mr. Jones has received. But Mr. Jones is not the #1 patient on my list of concerns, as I try to point out to the nurses and physicians. Rather I am much more concerned and hope to have the opportunity to call on a despairing patient who is frightened and often angry at God. When I knock on the door and introduce myself, the patient may often respond with something like, “I don’t know if a chaplain can be of any help to me” or something like, “why is this happening to me.” But then a conversation begins. The chaplain tells me she is angry at God for the accident or illness that happened to her. It’s not fair. She has been a good religious person. Her family and friends have told her not to get angry. God will take care of her. I take a different tack, and when I say something to the effect that “you feel like God has abandoned you and let you down,” you can often hear a sigh of relief, and I look of a bit of disbelief, as I assure her that it’s okay to get angry at God. God has been around a long time and anger is nothing new to God.

Matthew focuses our attention on anger, to remind us it can lead to do terrible things, to separate us from friends and family. So acknowledge that you have the anger and try to do something about it before it gets out of hand. And don’t try to avoid it by simply going to a worship service, because if you are out of sorts due to something your brother or sister—

whether biologically or in faith—had done against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. The key word here is “reconciliation.”

After setting forth the guidelines for not allowing anger to get out of hand, Matthew turns his attention to a subject which has always been something of a taboo to discuss in religious circles: namely, sex. Once again he focuses on the feelings behind an inappropriate behavior by declaring, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” And who in the world would have thought that Jimmy Carter, in his campaign for the presidency, would openly confess that he on occasion had looked at a woman with lust in his heart. If nothing else, he provided countless comedians with a wealth of material as well as generating that kind of national attention that may have contributed to his eventual election. Matthew’s recommendation of what to do in such a situation strikes me as a bit extreme when he lays down the instruction, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and . . . 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” (5.29,20). I think most of us would find this remedy pretty extreme. Indeed, if we read on Twitter, saw on television, or heard on the radio that someone had cut off his hand, or any other part of his or her anatomy because of feelings of lust, we would, more likely, assume that he or she had to be a mental patient.

While Matthew’s remedy for feelings of lust would strike most of us as unacceptable for a rational person, his further elaboration of the adultery theme, and its role in divorce, would be dismissed by most people today as paternalistic and out of touch, when he writes, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (5.31.32). Every time I hear this verse I am reminded of my sixth year in ministry when I was invited to organize a chaplaincy program at the Princeton Medical Center while also assisting with teaching at the seminary. Shortly after I arrived in Princeton, the local presbytery, a body of Presbyterian ministers, appointed me to a committee whose task was to determine whether or not a local minister in the process of a divorce was the guilty or innocent party so that he could either continue as a pastor or be removed and lose his ordination. When I heard what we were expected to do, I quickly resigned, explaining that as a trained pastoral counselor and family therapist, I believe the likelihood of one party being guilty and the other being innocent is extremely rare. Today, some fifty years later, if a minister filed for divorce, and someone suggested we needed to determine the guilty and innocent person in the case, he or she would be laughed out of the room.

Moreover, we might point out to Matthew, “why is it assumed that the wife that is the adulterer?” It sounds a bit like the old saw of women being the weaker sex and less able to resist temptation—going back to Eve in the Garden of Eden.

So let’s pause and step back for a moment and ask ourselves how to respond to his rather harsh set of “Thou shalt not” rules. To be sure, Matthew calls our attention to the importance of recognizing our feelings and how much they influence our actions—often in a negative way. I believe it might also be said that he appears to take some editorial freedom in

his effort to connect with those caught in excessive legalism, which characterized the Jewish community of his time.

So lets reflect a bit on rules.

- 1) We can all agree we cannot live without. rules. Utopian dreamers and extreme individualists who insist on everyone being free to do his or her “own thing” ultimately end in chaos and disarray.
- 2) Harsh rules and regulations that characterize dictatorships are the other extreme—and not the answer as we witness in countless dictatorships around the world—present and past...
- 3) Rules serve as a kind of fence to identify boundaries, which ultimately protect us from one another, and from ourselves, as well as enabling us to know what to expect in our interactions.
- 4) The ultimate goal of all rules is to establish and enhance relationships.

Luke 10.25,26, Master what must I do to (inherit eternal life?) What is written, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and all your mind—AND your neighbor as yourself.

Amen.