

Who is Jesus? The One Who Calls us to Life.

Introduction

This morning's reading from the Gospel of Matthew comes from that part that we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. In the 3 chapters that make up this sermon, Jesus, is teaching – as a Jewish Rabbi would teach – about kingdom life. Jesus you see has come to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near – and in his teachings – we get an idea of the radical nature of the ethical behavior that defines this kingdom – behavior that is simply summed up by acting in ways that show love to God and to others.

Prayer

Scripture

Kingdom Life

Jesus has come to 'save' us from sin and death. (Yes?) Jesus has come to 'save', to 'rescue', to 'free' us from the sin, the brokenness, the hatred, the greed, the lust, the sloth, that binds us. (Yes?) Jesus has come not only to save us from something – but for something – and this thing that we have been saved for – is life – kingdom life.

“From that time Jesus began to proclaim,” Matthew says in the middle of chapter four, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* (4:17) And just a few verses later Matthew tells us that *“Jesus went throughout the Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom...”* (4:23)

I think that it is fair to say as we think about this kingdom that Jesus has come to usher in – that it is not a place with borders and boundaries – instead it is a way of being – a way of living – a way of living rightly. This living rightly meaning – as we find out in our text this morning – not keeping a bunch of rules and obeying the laws of the kingdom – but rightly as in how we were created to live as God’s people – people who reflect God’s love – people who are generous – gracious – compassionate. People who are good – down to the bone - good.

We have our rights

What Jesus is saying here is radical. He is talking to people whose lives have been centered around the idea that living rightly meant – keeping all the rules – obeying all the laws. (Hmmm, that sounds a lot like us.)

Laws and rules are important aren’t they? Without them there would be chaos in our world, in our nations, in our cities, and in our homes.

Laws and rules spell out for us what is right and what is wrong. They guide us in seeking justice when we are wronged, don’t they. In fact we pride ourselves in being a nation that is built on the ‘rule of law’. And at the center of our laws – are these principles we call the Bill of Rights – the freedom of speech, the freedom of assembly, the freedom to bear arms, the freedom to practice our religion a part from interference from the state – so forth and so on.

Have you been paying attention to what has been taking place over in Madison, Wisconsin these last few weeks? A feud that began between the governor Scott Walker and the public workers

unions – has spilled over drawing national attention. People from around the nation are coming to Madison to protest – you know why – because their rights are at stake.

In fact in yesterday's Gazette there was an article that said that public sector workers have flocked to Madison to demand their rights. On the side of the Unions it is the 'right' to have a voice at the table when compensation for their labor is being determined – it is the 'right' to have a stake in their futures. For the governor, and the State of Wisconsin that he represents, it is their 'right' to do what needs to be done to keep the state fiscally sound and stable.

Have you been paying attention to what has been taking place in the Mid-East. People have been gathering to demand their rights – rights for safety and security – rights for the economic viability to provide for their families – rights to have a say in their government.

Now we may look across state lines and we may shake our heads – or we may look across the ocean and point our fingers – but the truth of the matter is what is happening there really doesn't affect us. But just tell me which doctor I have to see, or which hospital I must go to, or which prescription drug I can have – and I will scream bloody murder about the 'right' I have to make a choice.

Just try to take away my right to drive. Just try to tell your teenager that they can't go with their friends ... and you will hear "That is not fair! That is not right!"

We learn about our rights and defending them at an early age. The middle school screams from his room. “Mom! Tell Sally to get out of my room she’s invading my privacy!”

What Jesus is saying here is radical. Jesus has said that *he has come not to abolish the law but fulfill the law.* (5:17) Which must mean that laws are important – that laws are meant to protect our rights - like the right to:

Retribution when we are wronged.

Retaliate when we harmed – when our safety and security are threatened.

To possess (a cloak to keep us warm in winter)

Set our own travel itinerary

To hate

To love

But even as Jesus lifts up the law as being important, ‘*until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one iota, not one vowel stroke – will be unimportant.*’ (5:18)

What Jesus is saying here is radical because what he is saying is that while the law will give us protection – and rights – and it will protect our rights – there is something more – and that is we must give up our rights – in order to follow him.

Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Center saysⁱ in commenting on this text from Matthew,

...the structure of Matthew 5:38-48 subordinates the five cases (turning the other cheek, giving your cloak as well, going the second mile, lending to those who ask, loving your enemies) to make a larger point about discipleship. – Loving neighbors, even their enemies, disciples sacrifice their own personal rights in order to demonstrate their imitation of God.

‘Disciples sacrifice their own personal rights in order to...imitate their teacher Jesus.’

I know what you are thinking right about now – you are thinking that this is impossible – you are growing indignant – you are establishing in your head under what circumstances you would accept such a premise. You are blowing it off – for you know that it is impossible to be ‘perfect’ as your heavenly Father is ‘perfect’.

But Jesus didn’t say to us that following would be easy – in fact he said – *if you are going to follow me you must deny yourself – take up your cross – and then follow.* (Mt. 16:24) He said that those who wanted to follow would *give up their right to live.* (Mt.16:25) That they would give up their *right to possess.* (Mt. 16:26) That they would give up their *right to home and family – their right to grieve.*

Theologian Jason Byasseeⁱⁱ in commenting on our passage says,

“this is no admonition to try harder – if it were it would be a recipe for despair...it is not an admonition doomed to failure – or a word of judgment meant to drive us into the arms of grace...”

To which we should respond – ‘thanks be to God.’

Jesus is not calling us into perfection in some kind of western philosophical kind of ‘being without flaw or blemish’ kind of way. Jesus is not calling us into some kind of dualistic Platonic – body is bad – spirit is good – spiritual perfection kind of way. Jesus is instead calling us to live in the goodness of our created image. In the greek the word translated ‘perfect’ in the NRSV has a connotation of wholeness. We get this when we read – as we did this morning from the Message that we should,

“...live out our God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward us.” Mt 5:48

It is at this point where I find myself needing to come back to where we have been traveling these last 4 weeks. It is at this point I need to ask myself about Jesus’ divinity and Jesus’ humanity – and if my – believing that Jesus is truly fully human and fully divine makes any difference. Any difference in how I hear this passage. Any difference in how I live this passage.

Jesus in the fullness of his divinity – he has rights doesn't he? He has the right to judge – the right to determine the righteous punishment – the right to impose judgment. Jesus in his divinity has the right to exercise his power and authority – over all of creation.

Yet Jesus in the fullness of humanity sacrifices his divine rights – in order to show us the breadth of God's love for us. Jesus gives up his right to demand obedience from the religious leaders – he gives up his right to condemn the sinner – he gives up his right to retribution – his right to life.

It seem that we are back where we started this series several weeks ago – Philippians 2 – where Paul says that our minds should be that of Christ Jesus – who while he was God – he didn't consider the 'rights' of his Divinity his God-ness as something to be held on to – instead he gave up his 'rights' – humbled himself – for the sake of love.

But I don't want us to misunderstand something here – Jesus is no powerless victim – put instead he chooses to act in ways that confounds us – but in ways that reflect the kingdom life that he has come to proclaim.

Kathleen Norris writes in her book, *Acedia and Me*

The kingdom of God within us is not something we gain through training, wit, or skill. It comes to us as pure gift, and we are free now... to nourish it, curb it, or ignore it.

What will we do with this gift?

Jesus has come, fully human and fully divine in order to save us. To save us from sin and to save us from death – in order that we might have life – life that reflects the goodness and the generosity of the God who created us just that way. Amen.

ⁱ Carey, Greg, *Feasting On The Word, Year A Volume 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville Kentucky, Commenting on Matthew 5:38-48 p. 385

ⁱⁱ Byassee, Jason, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 1*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville Kentucky, Commenting on Matthew 5:38-48 p 380f