

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • AUGUST 11, 2019
“BONDING TO BECOME MORE”

Litany

Based on Psalm 50

The Lord of creation summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Our God comes and does not keep silence.

“Call on me in the day of your trouble, and I will deliver you.”

Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice know the salvation of God.

The Scripture

Matthew 5:17-20

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Message

All in All

Nick Larson

In his book, *Lost Connections*, Johann Hari talks about his decades of work in the fields of trauma and mental health. He explains why he believes the root of almost everything we suffer through is a severed connection we never figured out how to repair.

Connection is foundational to the biblical narrative of what it means to be created in the Imago Dei, or image of God.

In the creation poetry of Genesis, we are told that the human being whom God first formed out of the dirt and blew life’s breath into was discovered to be incomplete or not good to be alone. So, God formed a helper for companionship, and so they would care for this beautiful creation together.

From the beginning of our faith tradition, we have known that connection is the experience of oneness. It's having shared experiences, relatable feelings, or similar ideas. We know from both our own lives and our ancient stories, that the biggest problem in most people's lives are traumatic experiences. What trauma creates is a damaged ability to connect with others.

My friend Hugh, a Mennonite pastor who served folks experiencing homelessness in North Carolina, used to tell me all the time that the opposite of homelessness is not homes. It's connection. Offering a home to one who does not have it may help, but they never end up on the streets in the first place if they have genuine connections that will help them out of their despair.

We are a tribal species. There is no way around this despite the teachings of our highly-individualistic culture and what its marketing and philosophies want us to believe. We are created in connection and through connection, and it is through that we accomplish virtually everything else in life.

I once heard the author and Christian thinker, Rob Bell, speak, and he shared that everything in the known universe is made up of other parts. The whole of a new form or thing contains all the parts of the previous stage.

Think about it. Ever since the Big Bang, matter has been developing more complexity, depth, and unity. Particles bonded to form atoms. Atoms bonded to form molecules. Molecules bonded to form cells. Cells bonded to form organisms.

Humans developed language to form social bonds. And God was in the midst of all of that, weaving and knitting it all together. God, from the very beginning, calls us as human beings to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

I've been teaching this summer in the Loft with our middle and high-school students. I've been doing that with and at the suggestion of Barb McClay. We have been studying the Sermon on Mount. When Terry and I began discussing this next series, thinking about what God wants to offer us as this particular community of faith for this fall semester, I was reminded of a conversation we had in the Loft that centered on the Sermon on the Mount and where it hinges.

For me, I tend to think the whole complexity of Jesus' pinnacle teaching in the gospel of Matthew is pivoting right here. It is the hook of his entire message of the good news of the kingdom of God. It hooks you right here in our text this morning.

Matthew, you must remember, is a good Jewish person. He was a devote follower of the ancient tradition, and he seems motivated to show us that Jesus of Nazareth is following and offering a wholeness to the tradition of Abraham and Moses.

To see the complexity of what Jesus is offering us in our text, I want to set the context, this sermon, this teaching, which is being offered to Jesus' disciples and all those, who have come to see just who is this miraculous man.

Matthew shares with us that everyone in Syria seems to be raving about this man, this Jesus of Nazareth. He has drawn a large crowd as he traveled, teaching, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

So, note that this is a mixed audience. Jesus, in this sermon, knows that he is speaking not just to his Jewish followers, but also to all who came to see. He begins this sermon with a series of statements we often call the beatitudes.

The "Blessed are the" ...statements. "Blessed are the hopeless. Blessed are the hungry and thirsty. Blessed are the peacemakers; the pure in heart; those grieving. Blessed be the misfits; the outcasts; those who feel like they don't belong."

In Sunday School, we discussed how this is Christ, a master communicator, drawing in his audience. These blessed may seem odd to us as prototypical westerners, but this crowd gathered were those grieving, hopeless, hungry, and thirsty.

Jesus is fishing for people... and has begun to hook them.

Then he transitions with talking about the Salt and the Light, two metaphors that these audience participants would have been familiar with. Salt and Light were critical elements in their daily lives, as they continue to be in ours. The key with this communication moment, is that Jesus is telling those listening that **THEY** are the Salt and the Light.

The incomplete, the hopeless, the hungry and thirsty sitting on this hillside listening to this master teacher, are being included in his vision for the world and not only that but are being asked to play a key role in it.

Here, this master fisherman has begun reeling them into his vision.

This is where Jesus transitions into the perplexing section we read together today – this teaching that is pulling up the tradition from which Jesus comes, that of the law and the prophets. This is Christ referencing what most of us call the Old Testament, or better the Hebrew Scriptures. The Law and the Prophets were the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and the supplemental stories of all the wisdom writings and the prophetic texts.

Jesus is saying that he is not here to begin something new, but to bond it together. To give it more complexity, depth, and unity.

Just as atoms bond to form molecules, and cells bond to form organisms, and we as human beings are more than the sum of our cells, so too, Jesus is saying, is the way of God. The life in YAHWEH, the Hebrew Elohim, is not finished, but increased.

You can see this thinking in the next movement in the Sermon on the Mount, which continues after our passage from this morning as a series of “You have heard it said, but I say to you...” He addresses murder, and says that isn’t enough, that we need to learn to not be angry at our brothers and sisters in life. He tackles adultery, and says it’s not enough to not commit adultery, but one must learn to not look lustfully upon another, or you have already committed this sin. When an evil one attacks you and strikes you on one cheek, offer them the other. And it is not enough to love your neighbor, but also your enemies. He says it’s not enough to give your word and make a promise upon something you value like heaven, earth, or even your own life. Instead, we must always let our “yes” be “yes,” and our “no” mean “no.” He commands us to give to all who ask of us.

He concludes this expansive list of challenges by saying to those, who are listening, that we must be perfect like our Heavenly Parent is perfect.

Now, I don’t know about the first time you heard (or read) this sermon, but if I use a little of my holy imagination, and my own gut reaction to hearing these statements, I would imagine there was quite a bit of eye rolling from those gathered on this mountain. Jesus’ demands seem so high that it appears to be practically impossible to obey.

No anger. No Lust. Non-retaliation in the face of physical violence. Love your enemies. Give your cloak and your shirt too. Common sense would tell you that no one can obey these commands. At least not with any consistency and regularity.

So, what does Jesus mean when he offers us all these interpretations of the Law? What does it mean to be a follower of the Son of God, who acts like we must do these things, and our salvation or our entrance into the divine life is dependent upon them?

This is where I think our approach to faith and life matters so much. If we stick to our western model of thinking, then this becomes a list of requirements that we must constantly check off. Let’s be honest; if it is, most of us, chief among us – me, leave a lot of these boxes unchecked!

So, I don’t think that is what Jesus is doing in this greatest sermon. Remember it’s important to see what he’s doing in the overall movement of this sermon. Jesus has hooked in the crowd and his followers by reminding them that in their hopelessness, they are blessed. In their grieving, they are blessed. In our struggle through life, we are blessed.

Then he is reeling them in saying we must be the Salt, or flavor enhancers, and the beacons of goodness into the world.

And then he nets us, his fish, by saying that he came not to undo the law, but to fulfill it.

This is where we must connect again to his notion of being perfect as God is perfect. The *Common English Bible* translation may offer you some insight into the Greek that Matthew is using in this statement. The CEB translation reads “Therefore, just as your heavenly father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.”

Here, Jesus, the Jewish teacher, is reminding those gathered of a deep and ancient Jewish tradition of wholeness.

Perfection is not a static state where every grain of sand of the beach is perfectly aligned, but the loving sounds of the ocean waves crashing into the beach over and over again. It is the ever-cycling rhythms of life that create harmony and balance. It is a thriving eco-system as a web all connected together. In essence, Jesus is telling us that we can live in tune with the divine song, by joining into the melody that is playing throughout creation all around us.

If we see the Law and the Prophets as important cellular organisms of life that have formed along the way, then we must see this challenging ethic of Jesus as achievable, and God’s intention for us in daily life.

The Grace of God teaches me, that God is not fundamentally against us. Many have interpreted these passages as if God were the cosmic judge out there somewhere ready to rain down the gavel of punishment upon those who don’t measure up. But to me, that is an awful, and not biblical, view of God.

I want you to begin in a very different place. First, I'm convinced that God is fundamentally *for us*. Second, I'm convinced that God simply wants our best, day in and day out. God wants our all, our full effort, nothing held back. And if we've given our best, God will be satisfied, even if we fall short. *And we will fall short.*

So, grace is rather like an ecosystem of loving support and strenuous moral effort. The effort isn't done to "win" or "earn" the support. No, the effort is only conceivable against a pre-existing background of support.

To some, this might seem woefully inadequate. It seems to leave a lot of loose ends and unanswered questions.

To answer those questions, many offer a system or an explanatory theory, like "justification by faith" or *Sola Fide*.

But I don't care about theories. It offers "Me + Getting Church Right = Salvation." And that's how I view that doctrine.

That's a system. An algorithm. A math problem. It's not the Gospel. The Gospel is always good news, and always becomes more.

Christ even includes a very important nod to this perspective on wholeness, when smack dab in the middle of the Prayer he teaches them, and we recite together, that we simply pray, "Forgive us our sins (and debts), as we forgive those who sin against us (and our debtors)." This is my assurance that God isn't waiting to smite "thee," who doesn't live up to this ridiculously high bar. If we are asked to take upon ourselves this God-like quality of forgiveness of those who appeal to us, then we can be assured that God will do even more.

And so, we can trust that the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice.

Johann Hari, in that book, *Lost Connections*, I mentioned in the beginning, says that, "*Most people believe a connection is something they earn by being 'good enough,' when it is really something they develop by being willing enough.*"

Healing is a return to wholeness, reintegration into easiness, calmness, and willingness to allow life to be as it is, rather than trying to control how it is perceived. It is our own willingness to try again, be vulnerable again, show up for others, reach out, and make ourselves an active part of our communities and families and friend groups.

I think that's what Jesus means when he said he came not to abolish what came before him, but to fulfill it.

Could it be that simple? And that hard?

Amen.