

July 19, 2020

Sermon Series: The Teacher According to Matthew

Prayer of Illumination:

Merciful God, we pray that you would illumine our minds more and more as we look to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. Open our eyes to see wondrous things in Your Word of truth. Open our ears to hear Your still small voice speaking to us the Words of life. And open our minds and cleanse our thoughts so that Your Holy Spirit may guide us into all truth. May we be increasingly willing to submit to His gentle promptings, so that He may guide us into Your way of peace. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Scripture Readings:

Responsive Psalm 139:1-12; 23-24 (projected)

Gospel: Matthew 5:17-26; 43-48

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Sermon Title: 'Little Steps'

Tomorrow, July 20th is the 51st anniversary of a little step. A step witnessed, in a way, by 650 million people – that is it was a step witnessed by so many because of television. On July 20, 1969, many of us here watched in suspense as Neil Armstrong descended a ladder towards the surface of the Moon. As he took his first **steps**, he uttered words that would be written into history books for generations to come: "That's **one small step** for man. **One** giant leap for mankind." A small step indeed but one that changed and expanded the globe.

It is often said that the world is changing rapidly. The pace of change in areas like technology, business processes, competition, marketability, fashions, trends, information overload, climate issues, accessibility to and the ever increasing reliance on data as provided on the world-wide-web – (this FYI there are more than 4 billion people using the internet daily!). All this change is the whole world exhausted. But the truth remains that every change begins with a single step. It is credited to be an old Chinese proverb that said – “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Remember the game 'Mother, may I'? What a polite childhood game that was – asking permission for every step to take – baby steps, giant steps, leaps forward. And after asking

permission, with one child at a time asking for permission to move, the goal was to be the first to get to the finish line.

There are lots of examples as to how we go forward toward our goals – one step at a time. In doing so, small steps are good. Small steps are the beginning of any progression in any sphere of life and living. I venture to say though that the only small step for most of us that was ever applauded, highlighted, video-taped possibly was that first step as a toddler when we reached out and walked toward the open arms of a mother or father.

That step was noteworthy. After that no one noticed.

We all make small steps – most of them are not earth shattering but without them we would not be where we are – personally, professionally, relationally, spiritually.

As Jesus begins his ministry and teaches his disciples, he sets before them the small steps that will move them into kingdom living. The passage we just read gives us a few examples. We begin our small steps to kingdom living from a place of blessing. That's what the beatitudes were all about – **we are blessed** – regardless of our condition of being poor in spirit, of hearts filled with pain and loss, of being unnoticed, of hungering for a better life, of being in need of mercy, of trying to be better by our own will and power – regardless, we are first of all **BLESSED**. Blessed by God. The Gospel writer Matthew gives us the content of Jesus' sermon on the mount by emphasizing blessings first, than commands – the commands are hard, they will make us uncomfortable, they will convict us – but if we manage to keep the context in mind that we are first and foremost blessed – blessed to be called God's children – blessed to be so loved by our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus – blessed to be taught these words and blessed to have God's strength to sustain us - then what follows will indeed allow us to understand later when Jesus says "my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

First Jesus speaks about the scriptures – he tells us how valuable and valued the scriptures are for kingdom living. Jesus affirms that he personally came to fulfill the scriptures. This was so very important for the first disciples to know. Also the crowd who had gathered on the hillside on that day were listening to the man called Jesus, the one whom John had proclaimed was sent from God; the one whose sandals John himself said he was not worthy to untie; the one who was greater. The one John believed was the Messiah. Was he? The crowd gathered in curiosity. The crowd gathered but Jesus focused on the disciples. It was they who needed confirmation of who He was and to be convinced that He was indeed the Anointed one. The most significant test might be in his knowledge of and acceptance of The Torah. Jesus communicates immediately that he has come to fulfill the Law & the Prophets. His respect for the Torah would surpass theirs – and they indeed were faithful Jews in their knowledge of and

respect for the books of the Torah and the traditions of their Jewish faith. And here in this sermon Jesus is quick to declare that it is His role is to fulfill the scriptures. Someone once said that our own respect for the Old Testament might increase if we called the Old Testament the **'Jesus Bible'** – for it was the only Bible Jesus had to read and study!

And that he did – even at the age of 12 when he was sitting with the rabbis rather than accompanying his parents on the journey home from Jerusalem.

For the Jewish listeners who sat that day on the mountainside and for us Gentile readers of scripture today, **we need to hear this acceptance of, respect for, and desire to obey the scriptures.**

Jesus goes on to say that those who accept the scriptures, obey them and teach, lead, encourage others to do the same, they will be the ones (you and I among them) who will be the ones called 'great' in God's way of seeing things!

The rest of the passage we look into today is like reading a commentary written by Jesus on some of the harder Old Testament passages. Matthew gives us a whole set of – “you have heard it said..., but I say unto you” statements. Jesus has great respect for what was written. **He says though that He has authority to say more.** In other words, Jesus is offering to take what is written and go deeper. What you have heard, what you have been taught has been all well and good and true but there's more – there are nuggets of gold in these commands. Something here of much more value than you may have previously thought.

We will just go mining for a couple of deeper truths this morning.

“You have heard it said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder’... Murder, the taking of another human life indicates contempt for human life and in making reference to this, Jesus is remembering with them that this is one of the 10 commandments given at Mt. Sinai. When God says – “do not kill”, he is saying that He values human life. The act of murder shows contempt for human life. This same contempt, Jesus now says, is shown when one shows anger toward another. Therefore, Jesus says if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement...” The root meaning of the word anger is the English word 'orgy' or a fit of madness. We use phrases like being mad or getting angry. The Stoics called anger 'a brief insanity'. That speaks volumes doesn't it? Some of you have seen one of those Facebook memes which makes the rounds from time to time sayings “I'm going crazy, want to come?” Responses often come back to say things like “I'm already there!” The same could be said for anger! Sometimes, for all of us, we are already there. We are angry about something or other and we feel others should be as well. Come, join me in my anger.

What Matthew emphasizes here is not the temporary anger or those fleeting moments of being mad, - no this teaching is about carrying anger around with you, this is nursing a grudge,

this is anger that hurts our brothers and sisters. This is the decision to be angry. There is an old English proverb that says “he is a fool who cannot **be** angry, but he is wise who will not **remain** so.”

Don't you find the examples that Jesus gives so contemporary? In these examples I recall the writer of Ecclesiastes that's there's nothing new under the sun. People calling each other names – you fool, you idiot, you jerk, you're stupid... (depending on the translation being used). Hare-brained was the translation of an early church father named Jerome. These are ways we dismiss each other as if what they do or say says no value – when we dismiss someone in this way, we are saying he or she has no value. Maybe now we can see the connection, as Jesus did, with murder. The disregard for human life and dignity.

Jesus goes on to say - do something with your anger especially when you come to worship. Take a first step... even a small first step and so when you come to worship, before you and I would go too far into our religious duties, seek reconciliation. For those who have ever wondered why we have certain things in certain places within our communal worship – confession and assurance always come before offerings and responses. This is our time in worship to confront the sin in our hearts and seek forgiveness and grace. We do that with words provided in a prayer of confession, but maybe there needs to be more silence as we each deal with our own anger among other things. Another small step is to speak blessing and peace to each other and mean it (that is done in the simple action we call 'passing the peace' – although in these Covid regulations days, that is an activity frowned upon). Our practice here is to periodically include a time of peace sharing – but this does not need to be formally included for you to offer your peace and maybe seek reconciliation among your fellow worshippers. Relationships matter in our Christian life. Relationships matter when we come to church.

Jesus is very practical here. He is not saying never be angry. He knows that anger happens – there is a lot to be angry about from situations in the world, to the conditions of your work life, your family life, your church life, your private world – but what you do with the anger which happens is what Jesus means in his 'but I say unto you' statement. Jesus also emphasizes that relationships matter. Therefore every angry incident, every time a brother or sister who is disregarded or dismissed, - there is an opportunity for a fresh experience of conversion.

The second example, from this teaching I choose for this morning's mining for gold is this one - “you have heard it said ‘you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemies, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...’. Jesus may be referring to

those Psalms which speak of enemies in a spiteful manner in that such are actually not personal enemies but rather enemies of God. Regardless we need to be cautious of the label 'enemy' being attached to individuals or groups. We will encounter those who are against us – especially against the faith we hold dear and against the way such faith gives us priorities and direction that is 'other -worldly' (i.e. of the Kingdom). In Jesus ministry he did rebuke the Pharisees who were leading the people astray, he did view them as opponents to the true kingdom, but Jesus challenged them always from love. Jesus teaches here that we should love all who oppose us. And the first most helpful small step is to pray for them. Pray on behalf of the people who are persecuting us. Jesus own example was shown from the cross when he prayed "forgive them for they know not what they do." It is in praying for those who hate us that the problem we thought was entirely the other persons problem brings us to see our short-comings as well. It is also in this command of loving our enemies that the reward is the greatest. The result of doing so is that we will be "sons and daughters of your Father in heaven". There is a promise of increased intimacy in our relationship with God who loved us, saved us, and is now softening our hearts and changing us to have a love more like the love of Jesus. Jesus' love for others was rooted in the basic creation premise – that God called good all that He formed and created – we are all fearfully and wonderfully made! And yes, the sun shines, the rain falls on all. If God provides common graces to all, should we not do the same?

The heart of Christian theology is God's love of enemies – we were such once, let's not forget. One Christian writer put it this way – "if God in Christ reconciled His enemies by suffering servanthood, then those who follow Christ faithfully dare not treat their enemies in any other way."

Once again Jesus provides examples. All people find it easy to love those who love them. This is a common assumption. This is natural. Furthermore, if you give warm greetings to those of the faith, those who have a special connection with us, what's so special about that? Other groups do the same. Sometimes Jesus is not asking for exceptionally heroic behaviour but for behaviour that is common and genuine to all. We show the grace of God by the way we treat both friend and foe.

Small steps.

Small steps toward being the disciples Jesus wants us to be. Small steps toward the kingdom values and witness which communicate the difference knowing Jesus will make in this world.

Small steps which will lead to great blessing – for us and enable us to be a blessing to others.

Consider this today's challenge – take a few small steps in dealing with anger when he rises up in you. And take a few small steps in offering more kindness, more grace to those who may be the difficult people in your life.

To do so, you will receive blessing – that is promised.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.