

MAKE IT PLAIN

Matthew 5.21-37

Epiphany VI, February 12, 2017

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Lesson: Matthew 5.21-37 (abbreviated)

The famous Sermon on the Mount moves from blessing to responsibility. After telling the crowd, “you are the light of the world,” Jesus says:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of your religious leaders, you will never enter the reign of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’ ... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to the judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the fire of hell. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your sister or brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your sister or brother, and then come and offer your gift ...

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 ...

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to God.’ But I say, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is God’s footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No,’ no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Hymn: “God, Speak To Me that I May Speak”

Make It Plain

“God, speak to me, that I may speak in living echoes of your tone.”

This is one of those lines from an old hymn that has always fascinated me.

Tone matters. You might say to someone, “Don’t use that tone with me” because, regardless of what someone is saying, tone matters. Tone communicates.

So “God, speak to me, that I may speak in living echoes of *your* tone,” makes me wonder what we imagine God’s tone to be.

Perhaps our basses would tell us that God’s tone is a deep, grounding resonance.

Or the sopranos might tell us it’s a bright uplifting tone.

The altos might say that it’s that centering steady tone.

Or the tenors – well, the tenors would probably tell us it’s that glorious soaring tone.

Of course, whatever God’s tone is, it isn’t just one. I can’t imagine God as a monotone. The God I meet in scripture and in the world and in my own experience is multi-tone and it takes a choir of different voices to be the living echo of that tone.

But the question remains: What do we imagine that multi-tone trying to communicate? Is it a stern tone that sounds vaguely like your fifth grade teacher demanding obedience? Is it the loving tone of your grandmother for whom you can do no wrong? Is it the joyful tone of children squealing on a playground or that annoying tone of the Emergency Broadcasting System that gets your attention only to fill you with fear?

What do we imagine God's tone communicating?

Let me be clear this morning.

To speak in living echoes of God's tone means something more than simply perfecting my solo voice because God is not a monotone.

To speak in living echoes of God's tone means speaking in a way that communicates what matters for the world: doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with this God of many voices.

If Jesus is any indication of that tone, then we might echo the message of his Sermon on the Mount - blessing those who don't seem to be very blessed.

That's how this text in Matthew begins. Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn, the meek and the merciful, the ones who have an appetite for justice, the pure in heart and the persecuted. You can probably imagine communicating this in a compassionate and uplifting tone.

And then there is that empowering tone. There might be a lot of darkness out there, Jesus, says, but "you are the light of the world."

Now we get to that rather stern tone: "Unless your righteousness," Jesus says, unless your commitment to those things God requires of us "*exceeds* that of your religious leaders, you will never enter the reign of heaven." You have heard it said that you should not commit murder or adultery or give false testimony, but I say to you if you get angry with your sister or brother and say something that kills her spirit, go make it right with her before you come to make your offering to God.

If you do anything to disrespect women, you might as well dismember your own body because women were created in God's image and you can't possibly know the Creator without honoring them.

And here we go. You have heard it said that you shall not swear falsely; you shall not give false testimony; you shall not try to get around the truth with “alternative facts.” Let your yes be yes and your no, no.

Now this is the point when, in the African-American tradition, someone might say: “Make it plain, preacher, make it plain!”

When I first had an opportunity to preach in an African-American church on the Southside of Chicago, no one warned me that people would talk back to me during the sermon.

When they said, “Amen,” I got that.

When they said, “Well?” I started feeling a little insecure. Well what? I thought.

But when they got to “Make it plain” I knew what they were asking of me. They wanted something more than clarity. They wanted me to speak out of the confidence and the courage of my convictions. They wanted my yes to be yes and my no, no.

No beating around the bush. No uncertain tone. “Make it plain.”

This phrase has had common usage in the African-American community for a long time. You might know that the PBS documentary about Malcom X was called, “Make It Plain.”

And a few years ago, I heard an African-American choir sing a piece by gospel singer, Patrick Love. I had never heard it before. But it comes from an obscure text by the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk at a time when lawlessness and danger seemed to be everywhere. God says to the prophet: “Write the vision, make it plain.” Those words and that song has been echoing in my heart this week.

Because if there is anything we need to be doing in our own time of lawlessness and danger, it is to write the vision and to make it plain. Let our yes be yes and our no, no. This is the tone we need to be setting.

And first I notice that this is the language of boundaries. In a time like this, it is especially important to be clear that we cannot do everything. I suspect there are forces out there that are counting on us burning ourselves out. Be careful to say yes to the things you can do. And no to the things you can't.

Perhaps there is a way to make everything you do an act of resistance. Singing can be an act of resistance – what would the Civil Rights movement be without it? Eating and with whom you eat can be a powerful act of resistance – something Jesus made a point of doing. Resting can be an act of resistance when there are those who are hoping to wear you down. *Not* participating can be as much an act of resistance as participating. Coming to worship can be an act of resistance. Once a week we get to say that our primary loyalty is to a power that is not controlled by politicians. Giving can be an act of resistance. I want to suggest that if you don't believe in what this government is doing with your tax dollars there is an easy way to resist. Give to some tax-exempt organization you *do* believe in. And itemize. Make it plain?

Let your yes be yes and your no, no, which also sounds like the language of integrity. It's not only time to say what we mean but to live up to it.

As you heard, we are preparing for the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of Executive Order 9066 that sent our Japanese-American neighbors to Internment Camps. That Executive Order was announced – by a Democratic president – on exactly the date of this coming Sunday, Feb. 19, 1942.

I've thought a lot about what it must have been like for pastor Jensen, after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, to stand up in this pulpit in

February and speak out against the rounding up of Japanese neighbors and sending them off to detention centers.

I try to imagine what it took for him to stand here and call out the government for its injustice when that action was so popular among the general public.

I *can't* imagine he thought it was a very good church growth strategy.

I *can* imagine the risk he must have felt that people he loved – people he had cared for and married and dedicated their children and buried their family members – would walk out.

But he spoke out anyway. And he brought legal action against the government for appropriating Japanese property and possessions because his integrity required him to make it plain! To let his yes be yes and his no, no.

And we are at that moment again. The integrity of this pulpit demands that we say “yes” to our Muslim and Mexican and Central American neighbors and “no” to the forces and the executive orders that would send them away.

Let's make it plain, which also sounds like it will demand something more than clarity. It will demand courage.

I know that one of the ways we describe ourselves is that we are a place where living the questions is more important than having the answers and I'm fine with that most days. There is wisdom in learning how to ask the really good and important questions.

But if you are homeless and your question is where you are going to sleep tonight, you're not looking for analysis. You want an answer.

If you are a Muslim-American or a Mexican or Central American – if you are a person of color -- and your question is whether or not you are welcome here, you can't afford to wait for us to get our act together. You need an answer.

If you showed up this morning wondering if you could ever possibly be loved by God because you are lesbian or gay or trans or questioning, you don't have time for us to do the work of acceptance. You need an answer.

If you are here this morning afraid and in despair, you can't afford the time it takes to get to know you. You need an answer about the possibility of hope.

You need someone to make it plain.

So let there be no mistake about my tone this morning.

Letting our yes be yes and our no, no means that there are boundaries here that invite us to treat each other and ourselves with respect.

Letting our yes be yes and our no, no means that there is an integrity here that requires us to stand with those who are being treated unjustly.

Letting our yes be yes and our no, no means that if the question is whether or not you are loved and welcomed, the answer is always yes. We may not always be good at it. But the answer is always yes.

Because I'm not here just trying to perfect my solo voice. God is not a monotone. I'm here to invite you all to "lift every voice and sing, 'till earth and heaven ring; ring with the harmonies of liberty."

And today, if you hear that voice, don't harden your hearts.

NOTES

"Write the vision, make it plain," by Patrick Love can be found on YouTube. The history of Pastor Jensen at Seattle First Baptist Church is recorded in *Our First Baptist Heritage 1869-1984*.