

Shalom Is a Process

Luke 6:20-31

What do you think is the single most important, most essential, message from Bible? In other words, if you were to design a Bible bumper sticker, what would it say? It would probably say something along the lines of, "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is a famous story about an ancient rabbi who, when asked to describe the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot, replied, "What you don't want anyone to do to you, don't do to them."

Many believe that the essential teaching of Jesus was found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. A shorter and succinct version of this teaching is found in Luke 6, what is often called the Sermon on a Plain. You might call this "sermon" plain talk.

How is this for Beatitudes? "Blessed are you who are poor." Jesus spoke to the poor. In fact, most of the people to whom he spoke were poor. "Blessed are you who are hungry now. Blessed are you who weep now. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you--Rejoice!"

Jesus also spoke to the affluent, to those who were comfortable. "Woe to you who are rich! Woe to you who are laughing now! Woe to you when all speak well of you!"

Jesus was focusing on attitude—turning attention on our inner life and our deepest values. Too often we borrow self, personal identity, from what we have, what we accomplish. We look all over the place for something to make us feel okay, but what we're seek out there already present within us—at the core of who we are – at our center. That brings us to the Importance of centering prayer. It involves learning to trust ourselves as God's creation and to trust that God meets us at heart of ourselves. Jesus knew this and invited us to be on an inward journey.

These are hard sayings, but as hard as they are for most of us to hear, they really seem to reflect Jesus' message. This message was that we cannot have it both ways – not ultimately. We cannot seek security and place our trust in both our relative affluence and security and also in following Jesus. One or the other will command our true loyalty.

We will not be able to make or find real peace without committing our whole selves to treating others just as we would love to be treated and to loving ourselves just as we try to love others. There will be no peace within in or among us without changing the inequities in society – many of which we've inherited: racism, sexism, entrenched poverty, acceptable levels of violence. Each of us has to choose whether our efforts will go more toward maintaining the status quo or toward working for fundamental systemic social change.

If Jesus had a 30-second elevator speech about his plan for the world, it would probably be. "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you." That would take the first half, the first fifteen seconds. This is a focus on how we relate to the world and to each other. It is inevitable to have enemies, but we have to love them. Anyone with any personality will probably have people who don't like them, maybe even hate them. To those very people, do good things. To those who abuse you – pray for them. That doesn't mean that anyone should accept abuse, but don't let yourself become bitter, hate-filled.

The second half of Jesus' 30 second elevator speech would have involved how to put love into action. "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. From anyone who takes away

your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again!" These are not instructions to let people walk all over you. They represent, rather, a call to non-violent, but direct action—a call to hold people accountable.

Finally, just before elevator doors open, comes the kicker, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Live and act in ways that are transparent and powerful. Give others the respect of expecting the same from them. This is love--how Jesus' lived. This is the way he taught us to follow.

Shalom means peace, wholeness, and the oneness of all things. It is a realization of the connectedness of all people, all creation, and God. It is God's dream for all of us to know this, to trust this. But *Shalom* is not something that just happens in world or in people. It doesn't magically appear with snap of God's (anthropomorphic) fingers! *Shalom* emerges slowly when people, takes shape gradually. Comes to life only as people embrace it as our highest value and priority.

To make peace and to be at peace ironically involves some action. First, learn to believe in yourself. God believes in you! God is One. We are one with each other, We are one with God. Begin to embrace this oneness by trusting the values Jesus taught us--deep love and respect for ourselves and others. These values reflect our most divine and most holy human values. Yesterday, a group from our congregation prepared lunch for homeless people in Kansas City at Hope-Faith ministries. I was reminded that our role models and heroes need to be not only those who have achieved success in this world, those with great accomplishments, but also those who struggle courageously against overwhelming odds, those who persevere in the shadows of society, and those who, in the midst of great struggle who retain their humanity and their dignity.

The second action is to make peace and be at peace. Love your enemies as well as your friends. This is more action than emotion. It is a matter of will, of choosing to act lovingly whether we feel it or not. The third action is to act, be pro-active for what you believe, but never violent. In our relationships with each other and in our relationship with our society, with all of humanity, be pro-active and non-violent. This means being involved politically.

The Constitution declares that the government cannot prefer one religion over another. We must be vigilant in the appropriate separation of church and state. At the same time, we cannot hide behind this separation. What does this mean? It means vote. Determine which candidates and issues reflect the values you support. It takes work, research, willingness to ask questions – sift through the rhetoric, be guided by your faith, and vote. And more than vote, be involved in the process of determining policy.

We are part of Kansas City whether we live in mid-town, south-town, north-town, or Raytown--whether in Gladstone or Johnson County. Let us pray for the peace of this city and work for its best interest. Following Jesus means praying and working for *Shalom*. Only so can we fulfill our partnership with God. Only so can we allow the Spirit to work fully in the world. God loves us just as we are. Remember, we are not working to become acceptable to God. Salvation, acceptance, is already given. It is God's gift. The salvation we seek by following Jesus is the reconciliation of all people to each other--and to God. This is why we follow Jesus – to do God's work in this world. And God has chosen to do this work through us. Let's begin it now!