

John Sampson
"Legal Is Not Enough"
Text: Matthew 5:21 – 37
Preached at KVCC
February 16, 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

This is the big show.

2020 is the year to end all years politically.

We have a presidential election this year that will not only determine laws and policies moving forward. But, I think I agree that it will define who we are as a people for years, and years to come.

And it's begun. President Trump is going to be the nominee for the Republican party. And the Democrats are moving through a primary season to determine who will be the candidate of their party.

This is an election season that promises to be unprecedented in the amount of money spent, in the viciousness of the campaigns, in the proffering of ads based on half-truths and full blown lies.

As I've said before, as your pastor I'm not here to tell anyone how to vote. That is between you and your conscience.

What I am here to do is to offer a reminder of the values of God's kin-dom to consider when you are making your choices.

For the past two weeks we've been reflecting on the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The opening verses are known as the Beatitudes because they are statements of blessing, of who is blessed, and why. And I've been calling these statements the constitution of the community that Jesus is trying to found, and is inviting us to be a part of. The Beatitudes are statements of blessing because they are based on love, on a kind of love that calls us to empty ourselves so that we may be present and open to one another in both our strength and our vulnerability.

The constitution of Jesus' new community, of his new communion, is filled with the values of this new society: comfort, peace, humility, a love of what is right. These are the values

that Jesus asks us to adopt as his students, as those trying to follow his message, as those who are invited to love God with all of our being, and love each other in just the same way.

But now comes the tricky part.

Now we are asked to find a way to translate this constitution we've been reflecting upon for the past two weeks into an ethics and a politics for our lives in the here and now.

We are asked to bring the values of Jesus' community into our own decision making about our lives, including the debate about the direction of the future of our nation that sits at the very core of this election cycle.

When Jesus says, "you've heard it said...", what he's referring to is the Torah, the law, the actual religious law embedded in the first five books of our Bible.

You've heard it said, "you shall not murder," comes from the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy.

You've heard it said, "you shall not commit adultery," comes from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

These laws are the principles that regulated ancient Jewish society. They contained the values of the Jewish people, and they made the audacious claim, so foreign to us here and now, that following these laws guaranteed being in close relationship with God.

And you might think that observing these laws would be enough for Jesus. That he would simply ask his followers to submit to the law and be done with it. But he doesn't. Jesus pulls a Jesus. What he does is to bring a conventional understanding Torah into conversation with his constitution of love - not to overthrow Torah, but to intensify it, to extend it so that we can live by the law's underlying spirit and not just by its letter.

You've heard it said in the law that you are not to murder, but I say to you, from the perspective of love that underlies and founds the prohibition of murder, that anger and insult is just as dangerous to how you treat others, and to the health of your spirit. You've heard it said that if you don't actually kill someone that's good enough. But I say it's not enough if your heart holds contempt for your brother, or sister. Because you have lost your love for each other.

Jesus is telling us that a legal framework that has lost love as its foundation is insufficient, and is ultimately inhuman.

Jesus is called Rabbi, teacher, because he shows us a principle and then asks us to apply it in our own lives. You and I live a million miles away from the society that Jesus and his followers lived in.

They had no conception of democracy like we have.

They had no understanding of the equality of women like we have.

It would seem completely odd to them to have a secular law divorced from religious law.

But even with these differences Jesus asks us to bring the law of our land into conversation with the constitution of his community, and let the power of love begin to change and transform our understanding of how we relate to our legal system, and ultimately to one another.

You've heard it said that families entering our country can be separated without a way to be reunited, ever. But I say... What do you imagine Jesus, who grew up as a refugee, might say? How do you imagine we can finish this statement when we insist that love be added into the equation of our immigration laws?

You have heard it said that torture is legal. But I say... How might Jesus who was tortured and executed finish this statement? How do we as a people who come and worship in a space that is visually and architecturally focused on the symbol of a cross, of an instrument of torture and execution, complete this statement? If we embrace Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves is state sponsored torture even a possibility?

You've heard it's legal to consume as much power, and food, and stuff as we want. But I say... How do we finish this statement when we consider that our sacred scriptures tell us that the purpose of our existence is to take care of and nurture creation?

Jesus always challenges us to bring these kinds of questions back to our own lives. As our teacher he is constantly asking us to shine the mirror of accountability and of love on ourselves first and foremost. He asks us to ask ourselves is there more love possible in our lives? Is there more peace we can commit to? Could we grasp less frantically to our own egos?

But this is the big show.

2020 is the year to end all years politically.

At the end of last week's reflection I asked those who were present what kind of allegiance they had to Jesus' constitution of love. I asked if those who were present carried within them the values reflected in the Beatitudes, and if they guided them in their lives.

I think if Jesus' constitution has meaning for us in our lives, in this important year of politics, it is perfectly OK to ask our candidates if peace is one of their values. How have they been peacemakers in their lives and in their service to our communities? How will they us as individuals, and our nation collectively, make peace?

I think it is completely appropriate to ask those who are asking for our votes how they have mourned in their lives, and how they have comforted those who mourn in the communities

they've served. How will they help us, all of us, find comfort when we need it, and be the agents of comfort for our neighbors when they need it?

I think when we go to fundraisers and dinners with the candidates who say they'd like to serve, and remember that is the verb we use when we talk about electing someone into a position within government, I think it is completely appropriate to ask them what place humility has in service. How have they shown humility? How can they help us to be more humble, as a people?

I think it is a worthwhile question to ask those who would be our leaders what they understand the relationship between law and compassion to be. Does the love they have for their neighbors impact how they would enforce the laws of our nation, and of our community? How will they help us to be a more compassionate people?

Like I said, I am not going to tell anyone how they should vote. That is up to each one of you.

But I will dip in throughout the year to remind you of these values of God's kin-dom as Jesus understood them. Because they can get lost in the narrative of power, and of winning, and of beating opponents.

Ha! I lied. I am going to tell you how to vote.

Vote for love. Always vote for love.

Amen.