

“Healthy Spirituality Shows in Right Relationships”
Leviticus 19:9-16; Psalm 86:8-12;
Ephesians 4:22-32; Matthew 5:33-48

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The Gospel today starts with the word “Again.” We have just gone through three ways Jesus has talked about how relationships break and he’s going to go on. He gives us three more examples. Again. He’s not quite as clear this time about relationships breaking. He’s beginning to shift a little bit. People would say that we end on kind of a pivotal passage at the end of this. So as we begin, we hear that “again,” we come again to what Jesus says.

Last week I invited you to try to be N.I.C.E. this past week. If you remember what that was about, it was Noticing our relationships with others and what was happening with them, looking for Insight, recognizing what the Consequences might be, and then Engaging. In some ways, I feel like Jesus, in going forward here, is doing exactly that. He’s inviting us to notice, get some insight, look at the consequences, and be willing to engage. Let’s look at how he goes about that.

He says, “You have heard it said that you shall not swear falsely... But I say to you, Do not swear at all.” Remember, he’s fulfilling the law. He’s extending it. He’s guiding us into what it truly means to have a healthy spirituality, a great relationship with God. Don’t swear at all. Don’t give a vow. Don’t base your trustworthiness on something other than yourself. Don’t make a vow with God that humanly is hard to keep. How easy it is to say, “God, if you just do this for me, I’ll always do this.” How’s that gone for you? I know for me, that kind of thing is a struggle. I really want to do something, but it’s not always humanly possible. Even when it is possible, it isn’t always done. The will seems weak.

When he says to let your yes be yes and your no be no, he’s simply inviting us to be honest and not let it be about whether something else is trustworthy, but whether we are. I’m not making my vow on something else; I’m just saying yes. It’s about my trustworthiness.

Sometimes I wish I could. If I could make a vow on my hair so it would change color and I could get that to work, it might be worth trying. But it doesn’t. I don’t have control over what color my hair is. Well, OK, I could color it, but I can’t get it to grow out a particular color. All I can do is say yes. I’m not going to change the color of my hair by making a vow. He’s asking us to be honest with one another, and straightforward. If he’s beginning to lead us in a direction in this set of three, it begins with honesty. Honest to God and to each other. Let our yes be yes, our no be no.

Honesty is a great starting point for a relationship. Yet we know, as we work out a relationship we always encounter those times that are difficult. So he goes on, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.”

I have to tell you that when I hear that phrase, “Don’t resist an evildoer,” I struggle with it because I think that most of what scripture says is that we’re supposed to resist evil. So I do what I often do. I look at the words and think about what they’re saying. I noticed that as I looked up this particular word—though it wasn’t an easy one to find a whole lot of information on— there was another word in Greek that means “stand your own ground.” That’s what I usually think about in terms of resisting, is standing your ground. However, this particular word means more to be hostile and attacking. So he’s saying we don’t have to be hostile and attack to deal with evil.

He’s going on here to help us look at how to do that in a different way. The very first one is that when someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other. This is a famous passage, and maybe the hardest to understand. What does that mean? Does it mean I’m supposed to let everyone walk over me? I don’t think so. Let’s walk through it.

To strike on the right cheek, somebody has to use the back of their hand. Basically, what he’s saying is, “When somebody insults you by striking you on the right cheek, turn the other.” There’s a couple of things this does. Some have suggested that making somebody then use the open palm suggests that we’re equals. You can’t just write me off as the one you’ve insulted. There is a truth to the idea that if somebody insults me, strikes me on the right cheek, and I turn the other, it’s a request to them to see what they have done. It also will expose something else. If somebody strikes you on the right cheek and you turn the other and they hit you again, it tells you something about the person you’re dealing with. It’s revealing. If somebody insults you and you say, “Do you realize you just insulted me?” and they say, “It doesn’t matter,” you know something about where they’re at. But if they say, “Well…” and hesitate, it also tells you something. It tells you that at that point you can begin to deal with what was the real matter.

Turning the cheek exposes what’s happening. It exposes the nature of an insult, how deep it goes, what kind of person is insulting you. There’s an element of exposition here. It exposes what’s happening. He’s not saying that we should let people hit us all the time. That’s not what it’s about. It’s about what we can find out from what’s happening. How is it exposing.

One other thing I would say about this is that it’s a great image. It’s one of those things you will never forget—turn the other cheek—because it’s so clear an image. But think about it as an insult. If you just say, “If somebody insults you, don’t insult them back,” it wouldn’t have been as memorable. But it also gets at the experiential side of what happens. If somebody strikes me, the physiological response is either fight or flight. That’s generally, I think, what I would do. If somebody insults me I’ll either want to get out of there, or I’ll want to insult back and get in the fight. It feels to me like what Jesus is saying here is don’t do either one. Your body may want to flee or may want to fight, but check it out. That’s a hard thing to do. It’s beginning to ask us to have some imagination to see things differently.

Now if you don’t think turning the other cheek is that imaginative, I think the next one is even more so, although we usually think about turning the cheek. So begin to think that

maybe Jesus is asking us to check things out, find out what's really going on, not to simply start fighting or fleeing. Figure it out.

So, the next thing Jesus says is, "If somebody takes your shirt, give your cloak as well. The word there really refers to the undergarment. I think it's because it's probably made of better fabric, the stuff you want to wear next to your skin, versus a rough cloak. So if someone takes a person's shirt (undergarment), and the person also gives his cloak, he's going to be without any clothes. Does Jesus really want us to run around naked? I don't think that's the point, but think about the metaphor of exposing injustice. If somebody's going to take your shirt, expose the injustice.

As I read through this, I began to think that Jesus wants us to use more imagination. It's easy to fight. It's easy to flee. It's not so easy to figure out how to expose what needs to be exposed. It's not so easy to ask the question, "Why did you insult me? Do you realize you insulted me? What's this about?"

So, you turn the other cheek, you give your clothes to expose injustice, and then you go the second mile. As we work our way through this particular set of descriptions Jesus gives, it feels to me like what he's doing is saying you start out with recognizing that it's all about how to deal with what the other is doing, and begin to expose it, and then what do I do. My tendency is to want to make the other suffer the way they've made me suffer, to extract that revenge. But Jesus is leading me in a different place. If somebody forces you to go one mile (and this is probably a Roman soldier kind of thing where they conscript somebody to carry their stuff for a mile), keep going. Turn that relationship from one of domination to one of giving. That's where he goes with his last statement: Give to those who ask.

Sometimes it feels like it would just be easier to think about it as turning the other cheek so I get hit again. I don't have to think about anything more. When I begin to see that he's asking us to look at what's happening, that it's revealing, that it's exposing, that it's inviting me to enter into a relationship with the one that I'm struggling with, it's not so easy. He's not saying we stay in relationships of violence. If anything, he's saying we expose the violence that's around us.

You might say that as Jesus comes to this point, he's bringing home this particular part of the sermon. Have you ever heard that phrase, bring it home? Some of you would probably like me to do that a little earlier sometimes. But at this point in his sermon, he's bringing it home, at least to a mid-way point when he says, "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." I thought giving to those in need was hard. It's more than just the giving. He's going to ask me to care about the very one who seems my enemy. The one who makes my life miserable, I should pray for. This is not an easy teaching. And yet, it's consistent with what he's been saying, that we find a different way. Now he's beginning to encourage us to recognize that we can care for the other because the other is also a child of God. We are all children of God, even those who rub us the wrong way, and we can try to work this out.

As we have worked through this passage, I think it's a hard place to go. Jesus is inviting us, as we follow him, to recognize that this is a way of following. Perhaps THE way of following. What I would note is that as we go beyond this particular passage in scripture, we'll recognize that we're probably not capable of all of this on our own. As I said starting out in the Beatitudes, Jesus is inviting us to open our hearts in a way that allows God to work in our lives to encourage us to get to these places. We can practice with it, but to be the one who expresses all of this, I believe, depends on knowing a God who loves us and enables us to live in this way. I think even dealing with an insult is extremely hard if I think that my value is dependent on the person who is insulting me. But if I know my value is in my God who loves me and has come to show me his grace through Jesus Christ, then my value isn't dependent on the one who is insulting me. It's on God, and that opens up the possibilities of exactly what Jesus is asking us to do.

It sounds almost impossible when it ends with Jesus saying, "Be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect." A couple of things about that. One, it says "be." That is, we're moving towards a way of being. It's not necessarily that we can always choose the *doing* unless that *being* begins to change as well. That is dependent on our relationship with God, trusting that grace, trusting God's goodness.

The other thing about being perfect is that it's the goal. In Ephesians, it says that we are being led into the God-likeness of righteousness and holiness. We're moving into that. God's got the right relationship that we're looking for. That's the direction we're headed. Be perfect. Be complete. Be whole. Move toward this goal. Isn't that really what we're after, to be like Jesus?

Jesus is inviting us to follow him and he's giving us some examples. He's inviting us to recognize what he notices about us, the insights he gives us, the consequences he wants for our lives and the way he wants us to engage, to expose, in the midst of our need to flee or fight, what's going on so it can be changed. He's calling us on quite a path. Some people call it the high road, and it makes sense because it's a hard road. And yet, it's the road on which he's leading us, and it is, I believe, the road to life.

So I invite you to continue being N.I.C.E. That is, Notice, have Insight, recognize the Consequences, Engage. Remember how Jesus invites us to do that. Not by fighting or fleeing, but trying to bring to light what's happening.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, you give us such graphic images. You invite us into places that it feels are not easy to go. Your encouragement is to let ourselves become like you. Lord, it feels hard. Help us see, have the ability to notice, and give us the insights we need to recognize how we can deal with consequences and engage with others so that we might be your people, that we might indeed be children of your kingdom, of your family. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.