

9/12/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WORDS OF WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CELEBRATION AND SERVICE –

Senior Coffee/Fellowship this Friday morning 10:00 a.m.; Every Quilt Tells a Story

CALL TO WORSHIP

L: Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.

C: Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.

L: Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

C: Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!

L: Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.

C: Confirm to your servant your promise, that you may be feared.

L: Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good.

All: Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life!

PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

O Lord, we're here this morning, in your presence, with all variety of things on our minds... distractions, anxieties, things we're looking forward to, things we're dreading, our to-do lists, not to mention the things that run deeper – our hurts and our fears, grudges that we can't let go of, grief that can overwhelm us. In the midst of all our humanity, Lord God, you are present. Quiet our souls. Calm our ramblings. Draw us close to your Spirit and help us to listen, to pray, to praise, to search. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB YODER

God who has spoken,

Spoken to us through your creation, through scripture, through prophets at many times and in various ways, and most of all through your Son.

We give you praise, for we need your voice. We do not own your Word or fully understand your voice, but we need to know that we are not alone in the universe. We do not need to live our lives as a set of purposeless days, for you are not far from us.

You call out to us most clearly in Jesus, the one who faced the cross and conquered sin and death. Your righteousness and justice, as we see them, in Jesus give us life.

We don't always welcome your voice. We welcome you feeling like we are in the know, like we have the answers. We welcome feeling safe and secure. We don't always welcome a word that calls us to change course or to trust.

Teach us your way. Lead us in the path of your commandments, so that we can understand your loving will and observe it wholeheartedly. When we feel shaken and afraid, help us to remember that your word is solid ground, our only sure foundation.

We give thanks for this body gathered here this morning. For teachers and farmers, mechanics and accountants, medical and mental health workers, homemakers and retirees, children, youth, adults, and seniors.

We give thanks for our many students as they progress in the fall semester with classes as well as sports, music, and other activities. We pray for their learning to be rich. We pray for growth in relationships and in discovering who they are. We pray for everyone in the schools to stay healthy.

We pray for Sunday school teachers and classes in our church. We pray for a spirit of positive learning and growth in faith and understanding.

We pray for those who are involved in planning midweek activities as the beginning of October nears. We ask for your Spirit to give energy and to guide the planning process.

We remember those in our congregation that continue with medical issues or are living with pain. Be at their side during tests and doctor's appointments. We trust in you as our great physician in the midst of pain and uncertainty.

We likewise remember those in our congregation who are grieving. The process of grief continues even after time has past after losing a loved one. Help us to know how to support those in our midst journeying through grief.

We especially pray for Peter Wintermote, who is the social worker at Bethesda. We pray for your hope and peace for Peter as he experiences intense and unexplained pain and waits for answers.

God, we are constantly reminded that we live in a world with sharp divisions. Divisions and violence challenge communities, our country, and in the world.

This weekend has marked 20 years since the tragedy of 9/11. Many of us remember that day clearly. We remember displays of heroism and a sense of unity in our country that seems no longer. We lament the lives lost not only on that day, but the many times more numerous deaths of civilians and soldiers in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Even when we see few reassuring signs, we pray for peace in our world. We hold steady in our faith that you are working in unseen ways to bring shalom to our world and restore what has been marred by violence and sin.

So often the church reflects all of the same divisions. We pray that the good news of Jesus can help us see another way. We pray for your Spirit of wisdom and compassion will lead us to care first for the "least of these," for those most excluded and disinherited in our world.

You are faithful and do not change. Help us to know you better through the witness of scripture and the face of Jesus.

In his name...

PRAYER OF DEDICATION --
(Based on VT 1022)

Faithful God,

You show your faithfulness to us in so many ways.

May we be faithful to you and to the measure of knowledge of your Word that we have.

May we be faithful in our words and actions,
in our time and energy,
in our use of money and our resources.

Receive the gifts that we bring and use the work of this congregation and all who are part of it.

Multiply all that we bring to make your reign of love, justice, and peace visible here through the power of your Holy Spirit.

Amen

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

MATTHEW 5:17-48

Jesus' Teaching Alters the Law

Last Sunday we began this series talking about Anabaptist Essentials from the book of that title by Palmer Becker. Caleb kicked off the series, explaining that the first “essential” is that Anabaptists understand Christianity to mean discipleship. “Continuing to do in our day what Jesus began doing in 30 C.E.” It doesn’t mean that Anabaptists have a corner on the market of discipleship – any mainline Christian church will hopefully say that their goal is to be disciples – to follow Jesus. The distinctive is in the how. HOW do we do in the year 2021 what Jesus began doing in the year 30? If you missed Caleb’s sermon last week, I encourage you to listen to it.

One of the most important ways Anabaptists consider how to shape their discipleship has to do with how we interpret scripture. Palmer Becker tells us in chapter 2 that an Anabaptist essential is that scripture is interpreted through Jesus. Initially, this idea might seem self-evident... maybe even simple. But as one High School student whom I know well said to me, “Hmmm... interpreting the Bible can be kind of a problem, huh?” Yes, indeed.

Becker outlines several of the most common ways of interpreting scripture. He talks about the flat or literal understanding. This is when the reader gives equal and literal weight to anything and everything they read in the whole Bible. So, a flat biblical understanding would say that Leviticus 20:19 is just as important as Matthew 28:19. The verse in Leviticus says, "For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his

father or his mother; his blood is upon him." The verse in Matthew says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," It seems fair to say that most people wouldn't advocate the death penalty for a rude or disrespectful child, whereas much more thoughtful consideration is usually given to the great commission. Or maybe you've heard about or read books about people who've tried to live out the commands of the Bible, literally. *The Year of Living Biblically* by A.J. Jacobs comes to mind as a funny but sincere attempt to interpret the Bible in a flat or literal way. He discovered that it is literally not possible to do, literally, everything the Bible says. This method of interpreting scripture does not take into account the thousands of years that have passed since the scriptures were written, the cultural, political, economic, scientific, environmental... all the changes that have happened, but tries to read the texts – both Old Testament and New Testament – as if they were written in a vacuum. It also does not adequately take into account the activity of the Holy Spirit when interpreting scripture, OR the idea that we interpret scripture together, through the discernment of a faith community, reading and experiencing life together, trusting the Spirit and listening closely to one another as we read scripture. Both of these ideas were very important to early Anabaptists – and continue to be important. So the flat or literal interpretation of the Bible is not one that Anabaptists typically choose.

Becker goes on to describe the dispensational approach to interpreting scripture. This is the idea that God's will changes during various periods of time and history. In this method of interpretation there are at least 4 different Biblical/historical time frames and the center, the focus of this approach is Old Testament prophecy. So the way these interpreters would understand the New Testament, including the life and teachings of Jesus, is that that was only for the time that Jesus walked the earth and then again when he returns. But none of it really applies for all the time in between. In some ways, this interpretation makes a Christian's life much easier because there's no pressure to live out what Jesus taught in the here and now. The focus is on ensuring that believers are ready for the judgment that's coming when Jesus returns. But Anabaptists are pretty convinced that Jesus meant for his teachings to be followed by ALL his disciples in whatever time of history they live. So the dispensational interpretation doesn't really work for us either.

Then Becker gets to the Christ-centered approach. Ahhhhhh... finally, those who put Christ in the center of their Biblical interpretation. But wait. Becker distinguishes between those who are spiritualized Christ-centered and those who are ethical Christ-centered. Are you still with me here?

Those who put Christ in the center, but spiritualize him also really emphasize the Old Testament, especially prophetic texts that they believe looked forward and predicted the sacrificial death of Jesus – which is, perhaps part of what those texts were doing, but the problem is that when the focus is so strongly on Jesus' death, his life and teachings are often overlooked. Furthermore, those ancient Hebrew texts are then often understood to say things they did not intend to say. It seems that folks who prefer the spiritualized Christ-centered approach often want to preach from the Old Testament and the epistles of Paul rather than from the gospels – the direct accounts that we have of Jesus' life and teachings.

So... what is this ethical Christ-centered approach that Becker claims is a better fit for Anabaptist interpretation of the scripture? THIS is finally what we want to focus on this morning!

Anabaptists think it's important to try to read the Bible with the living, teaching, miracle-working, loving, challenging, essence-of-God, Jesus at the center. We believe that Jesus was, in fact, the most complete revelation of the Creator God and that it is in Jesus that we understand the messages of the scriptures. Anabaptists believe that the Sermon on the Mount is one of the key passages that help us learn to know Jesus. They came to this conclusion by reading and studying, for themselves, the scriptures – from beginning to end. They deduced that the patriarchs and the matriarchs, the prophets and the judges, in fact all the actors in the Hebrew stories were part of God's story. And they were all important in understanding who the Creator is, and the covenant made with God's people. They all moved in the direction of Jesus, the one whose life most clearly shows us the nature of God. As Becker points out, this is summed up in Hebrews 1:1-3, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son... who is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."

So we believe that Jesus, in his teachings and the ways he lived them out, interpreted the Old Testament in his own cultural context – and in doing that, offered a lens through which his followers in their own cultural contexts could continue to interpret the scriptures as God intended. Now that's saying a mouthful! And part of what it means as we'll see in the Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus offered his followers a **descriptive** pattern or template, not a **prescriptive** set of rules. This is important for understanding how Anabaptists interpret scripture through Jesus.

So now that I've given you the book review on chapter 2 of Palmer Becker, I'm going to try to briefly unpack this portion of the Sermon on the Mount and why it's so important for the way Anabaptists interpret scripture – through the Jesus lens. And in good, sermonic form, I'm going to give you three points.

First. Jesus came to FULFILL the Law, not to supersede it or invalidate it, not to throw it out or get rid of it in any way. Jesus came to show how to make the Hebrew Scriptures whole, complete. Matthew was referring here to the Torah, the Pentateuch and then he also mentions the prophets, so he is showing how Jesus interpreted the Hebrew scripture, the Law. He did not abolish it, but he also did not accept it as it had become the status quo. It had become at best a chore, and at worst, a source of systemic oppression and a way of wielding power – quite the opposite of how it had been intended. Jesus came to show how the kingdom of God can be brought here, on earth when God's people embody and live out God's covenant love, because THAT'S the message of the Hebrew scripture. That's the Law. It's not a prescribed list of moral imperatives and pious religious practices. It's a way of living. It's an understanding and embracing of God's upside down ways of tending the earth, caring for relationships, changing cultural systems that are broken and destructive. This is a way that Jesus interpreted scripture – by fulfilling it, living it, by knowing it so well that he could embody it and make it whole and complete – the way God intended it. Anabaptists believe that this is a way for us also to interpret scripture.

Second. Jesus gives us repeatable pattern in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Six times in this passage he says, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you.” These are called antitheses, and it’s a thing we can do in 2021. The template is, “This is how God’s covenant law has come to be understood and practiced. But this is what God’s wisdom and Spirit is actually calling us to right now.” It’s a way to help us call into question what has become normal, status quo and then to think, creatively, faithfully about how we can do better. It’s a way for Jesus’ followers in any time or culture to stay alert and not get lackadaisical about living out our faith. Another way to remember and think about these antitheses is that they’re all expressions of the Great Commandment: The first is about anger; love shows no hostility. The second is about adultery; love is not predatory. The third is about divorce; what does love look like in a marriage covenant. The fourth is about swearing oaths; love is unconditionally truthful. The fifth has to do with retaliation; love says, ‘don’t retaliate’. And the sixth is about enemies; love extends even to them. Anabaptists believe that these antitheses are another way to interpret scripture through Jesus.

Third. The final verse of this passage... “Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” Again, this is not referring to some sort of pious, legalistic, morally superior aim at perfection – that ends up being hypocritical and hollow! This is a mandate to live out our faith with as much genuine humility, wholeness of intention, purity of heart, single-minded devotion and allegiance to God – as we see in the example of Jesus. For Anabaptists, this is also interpreting scripture through the lens of Jesus. May God grant us wisdom and willing spirits.

RESPONDING AFTER THE SERMON –

If anyone has thoughts, reflections, questions, I would love to hear them!

What problems or issues have been raised for you by differing approaches to Biblical interpretation?

What does it mean to prioritize Jesus and his life/teachings in how we read the Bible?

Which parts of the Bible are most difficult for you to understand? In what ways does a (ethical) Jesus-centered approach help (or not help) understand the Bible?

SONG OF RESPONSE – VT 571, O God, We Read the Holy Law (tune – A Mighty Fortress)

Benediction – Go now, following Christ. Rejoice! Knowing that living out God’s word we are loved and secure.

SENDING SONG – VT 402, Rejoice, Rejoice Forevermore