Raising the Bar

MATTHEW 5:21-26 (NRSVUE) ***You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to 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 hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*** *[The Word…]*

These six verses are a part of a larger section of the Sermon on the Mount—a section that runs through verse 48: six repeated patterns of "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times… But I say to you…" And each time, Jesus raises the bar of expectations:

The bar against murder was raised to include hate.

The bar against adultery was raised to include lust.

The part about divorce needs a bit of explanation. Women had no recourse in abusive marriages. They literally were "property" with no protection under the law. But a man could divorce his wife for burning the toast! All that was required was that he stand in a public place and say to her three times, "I divorce you."

And a divorced woman had no rights and no protection. Her family, in most cases, would not take her back. She had few options other than begging or prostitution, unless another man would take her as wife.

Jesus raised the bar of valid grounds for divorce, from 'burnt toast' to 'sexual immorality.'

There was a heavy reliance upon oaths—"I swear by heaven," "I swear by my mother's mustache…" Jesus raised the bar: just live a life of honesty and integrity, and oaths are not necessary.

Jesus raised the bar on the ethic of equal retaliation—eye for eye, tooth for tooth—which, itself, in ancient times had raised the bar from unlimited retaliation/total annihilation. But Jesus raised the bar to an ethic of non-retaliation.

And then he extended that idea: "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." How you doin' on that one? Again, Jesus raised the bar.

I've been pounding away for a couple of weeks on this idea of Christianity based on "what's the least I have to do." "I don't have to go to church to believe in God." And since the Nicene Creed—4th century—Western Christianity has been vulnerable to a believe only faith: "All you have to do is believe."

Well, believing *is* where it starts, but we need to raise the bar.

I grew up in a very conservative church. I cherish that foundation of faith; but it was different then. Now it has become a political party—a power bloc taking its understanding of personal morality and inflicting it through legislation and making personal morality the primary standard for public accountability. I guess that works, in theory: if all individuals were morally and ethically accountable, there'd be no public or community problems. Right? How's that working out where you live?

When I was growing through the various levels of faith development, there wasn't the obsession with controlling the political process. Faith had not been aligned with political partisanism. Preachers didn't tell anybody how to vote. There was a general understanding that you can't legislate morality or faith. There was a general understanding—I learned it first in that conservative church!—a general understanding that whether the church controls the government or the government controls the church, it's going to be bad for everybody.

Separation of church and state was generally accepted as part of American ethos and history—***until*** far right Christianity became a political party, began to experience a bit of power, got organized, hooked up with money, got some people elected to public office, and began to change public policy—to legislate morality. Now our local public schools (and I suspect many others) sacrifice quality education on the altar of homophobic bathroom paranoia and white racist denial of history.

We need to raise the bar.

As of 7:00 last night: 11 new mass shootings in the last seven days—11 killed, 48 injured. The response from the Far Right Christian Political Party: "Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers." And they chant their religious mantra, "Guns don't kill; people kill." OK. Nobody disagrees with that; but, nothing is being done!

And then the Far Right Christian Political Party says the "liberals" are politicizing the tragedy! *Of course!* we're politicizing it, because they're ignoring it! Nothing is being done!

We need to raise the bar.

I have an idea about what may be our biggest obstacle to raising the bar for human relationships and humanity in general. Humans grow through identifiable and predictable stages, you know: infancy, the terrible twos, the trying threes… In each stage there are developmental tasks that, if accomplished, promote heathy growth and development. Virtually no one makes it through the gauntlet unscathed and undamaged in some way. That's why we need psychiatrists.

People like Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg identified specific stages of growth, beginning with infancy and early childhood when the human brain is incapable of abstract thought. Trying to teach kindergartners about sin

and grace and a transcendent God; trying to teach them some of the stories of God relating to humans like Abraham and Moses; telling them stories of a vindictive, violent God who orders entire cities destroyed—in the first place will fail. The child, unable to connect the dots, will be given a horrible, distorted view of God that will impair the development of mature faith, which is why a lot of adults picture God as an angry white male who punishes bad people and rewards good people. And so the late James Fowler, professor of psychology and theology at Emory University, identified Stages of Faith development.

In all these models, the infant learns trust or mistrust to the degree that she is reliably nurtured and tended. She doesn't have an abstract comprehension of trust; she just trusts or doesn't trust. But her trust is in a physically present caregiver, and a foundation is laid or not laid for future development.

Then, in early childhood, speech develops, awareness moves toward abstraction: words represent physical things, and symbolic connections are made. Emotions begin to be identified. Thoughts begin to embrace cause and effect; consequences are anticipated. At this stage, religion [good or bad] can be learned through concrete experiences and through the example of people in one's life.

In the elementary school years faith embraces a strong belief in justice as reciprocal: tit-for-tat. The brain still cannot process abstract concepts, and so deities almost always are human-like; metaphors and symbolic language often are misunderstood and taken literally.

During puberty the human brain begins to develop the ability to think abstractly, which begins to create potential conflicts with earlier assimilation of faith. This, in my estimation, is the most critical phase of faith development.

If the child's spiritual nurture has been healthy, he will be secure and confident in an exercise called, "I used to think." In today's text from Matthew, Jesus' pattern is, "You have heard it said… but I say…" Those who have been adequately prepared will be able to grow from concrete application of ideas through various levels of "I used to think," and will be able to raise the bar—to adjust and accommodate increasingly abstract understandings of life and of faith.

For children whose spiritual nurture does not facilitate a rethinking of previous understandings and misunderstandings, this critical period is a time of struggle and typically leads to one of two possible outcomes. The first outcome is a rejection of previous literal, concrete understandings of religious teachings, and with nothing believable to replace them, faith development is either delayed or stopped altogether, unable to grow beyond human-like and often distorted images of God, and they will continue to take literally, and reject, what is intended metaphorically. They may or may not retain a sense of spirituality, but there is no connection or continuity with early religious teaching.

The second outcome rejects any abstract concepts (religious or otherwise) that challenge literal, legalistic, concrete application of preadolescent faith.

This was not a serious issue until the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries. Particularly under the influence of Calvinism, science, philosophy, reason came to be seen as enemies attacking biblical accounts of creation and human history, which always had been seen as literal and factual. There was no room for metaphor or symbol in such a literalist approach.

Now, understand: my comments do not address any content of religious faith, or fact or truth, but only the human ability to absorb and assimilate and apply those qualities. And as we go deeper into our preparation for a time of discerning God's vision for our congregation, I come to two related conclusions.

First, while it is possible and even probable that we can work with Evangelical Christians in ministries of compassion and mercy, the different directions of faith development leave very little common ground upon which to build consensus regarding God's grace. They will continue to see grace as contingent, while we embrace grace as unqualified and universal. Pray that God will open our hearts and our minds to focus on our points of agreement and build relationships and levels of unity from there.

A second conclusion is strictly in-house: just us. And let me set it up this way: on the 7th day of creation, God rested. The sixth commandment establishes Sabbath rest as God's intention for humanity. One of Jesus' most popular sayings is, "Come to me, all who labor and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." The 23rd Psalm mentions being led to lie down in green pastures beside still waters.

When I conclude that we need to be continually raising the bar, I anticipate an initial reaction of, "Oh, no! More church work!" Well, when church work gets overwhelming, take a break!

But here's my second conclusion: rest was never meant to be a permanent experience or a final goal toward which we strive. Instead, rest was meant to restore our souls, to enable us to take up the yoke again and, having rested for a while, to move to the next level, always raising the bar.

Pastoral Prayer

- President Jimmy Carter
- Victims of Earthquakes in Turkey & Syria
- Shane: No signs that the cancer had spread; chemo? More tests; ten weeks
- Bethany's dad is in rehab in Greenbrier