

April 30 –Jesus Was a Rebel

Matthew 5:17-48

Jesus was a rebel...and it got him crucified

“Wait,” some of you might say, “Jesus wasn’t a rebel.” We demand, “How could Jesus be a rebel, he was only teaching what everyone knows is right. The scribes and Pharisees just didn’t know right from wrong. And, anyway, the Romans didn’t have any idea about who God really is.”

Jesus was a rebel....it got him crucified. To understand how radical Jesus’ teachings were, we MUST understand the context, the time in which Jesus lived and taught. It wasn’t anything like 2017 in the United States! To read the New Testament as if people of Jesus’ time had a lifestyle and values similar to ours today often leads us to misunderstanding what Jesus was teaching.

In Matthew 10:34-36, Jesus sets the tone for his ministry: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

In these verses, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, isn’t saying he came to start a violent revolution. It is generally understood, however, that what Jesus meant was that his teachings would divide people; and they did, and they do to this day.

To understand my statement, “Jesus was a rebel,” we need to identify the people, the groups of people, Jesus most often addressed as he taught. I identify three primary groups: the disciples, the general public and the religious leaders, the Jewish leaders. It is this last group, the scribes and Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders, who often are Jesus’ primary target. Matthew 23 contains a series of statements in which Jesus denounces them: “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees...” In John 8 and 9, as we’ve mentioned before, Jesus confronted the scribes and Pharisees as being spiritually blind. **1**

Well, perhaps we need to understand who the scribes and Pharisees were and why they may have been so blind to Jesus’ teaching. Jews were the people of the Law. The Law was the foundation of their community, their way of life, of life itself. The Law was understood to be what Moses gave them: the Ten Commandments, the Torah (or Pentateuch), that is what we know to be the first five books of our Old Testament. God had promised the Israelites a land of their own but often they had been under the political control of others: Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Romans. The law was their refuge: it was constant—unchanging, and it was the only area of life they could always have as their own.

But there was a problem. The Law was somewhat general in places: “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy,” for example. OK, we know when the Sabbath Day is but how do we make sure we keep it holy? What do we do or not do on that day. What is acceptable when it comes to work, healing, travel, and all aspects of life? So a group of Jews came into being whose responsibility was to study the Law and then write laws that would ensure everyone was keeping the Law. These were the scribes. In time, there were thousands of these laws, so many that when they were compiled, they filled 50 volumes.

Pharisees were the group of people who lived according to the letter of the law and enforced the letter of the law on everyone else. We can only guess why they did this: some were devout, wanting to be sure not to violate any single law. Some wanted to be noticed for how religious they were. (Read about the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14). Some sought power and influence: “I know the law so I know what is best for you, better than you do. Do as I say.”

Into this context, a people who held up the LAW (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) as their identity and held up all the thousands of laws as directions for being faithful to the LAW, Jesus came to teach God’s way. In our scripture today, we see Jesus contrasting God’s Law **2**

with the way it was being interpreted and imposed on God's followers. Jesus begins this passage, Matthew 5:17-48, with these words: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." We need to keep in mind two aspects of what Jesus is saying. (1) Jesus tells us he came to satisfy the provisions of the law. If there is sacrifice required by the Law, Jesus is the sacrifice. He came to do what the Law required so all of us can be in relationship with God, who loves us. (2) Jesus did not come to give thousands of new instructions on how to be obedient to the law; he did not come to enforce these new instructions on everyone. Jesus came to satisfy the requirements of the Law for us, and to teach us to live in God's love, sharing God's love with others.

In the teachings found in verses 21-48, Jesus begins with the words "You have heard it said" and then continues with "But I tell you..." He is telling his Jewish listeners to remember what they have learned from the Law and from the multiple laws explaining the Law. And Jesus was teaching as one with authority, one who has the power to add to or take away from the religious laws. As we read more than once, the scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus' authority: "How dare you call yourself the light of the world. How dare you call yourself the Son of Man. How dare you teach anything except the acceptable laws and understandings?!"

What was Jesus' take, understanding, as he taught of God's love for all.... There is a series of six teachings found in chapter 5. Let's take a look at them.

Mt 5:21-26

You have heard it said, "You shall not murder." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

When we read the Ten Commandments, we find "You shall not murder." Jesus expanded the concept of murder: murder wasn't just taking another person's life. It was demeaning another person with your anger; it was expressing contempt for another. It was words as well as actions.

3

Just as judgment falls on anyone who kills a person, Jesus says judgment will come to anyone who is angry without cause, anyone who shows contempt, anyone who destroys another's good name through his insulting words.

Mt. 5:27-30

You have heard that it said, "You shall not commit adultery. But I tell you anyone who looks at a woman lustfully already has committed adultery in his heart."

Again, in the Ten Commandments we find "You shall not commit adultery." Each married person is to be faithful to his/her spouse. Jesus expands on the understanding of adultery, including any deliberate intention of desiring one other than your own spouse, of looking lustfully at another. Jesus emphasizes this by speaking of tearing out the offending eye, cutting off an offending hand. This is a serious offense!

Mt. 5:31-32

You have heard it said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you, anyone who divorces his wife makes her a victim of adultery

Again, Jesus expands the understanding of divorce and adultery—notice his teaching is about both what is in verses 27-30 as well as verses 31-32. While Jews said divorce was against God's Law, their practice showed a different understanding. They didn't walk the talk, as we might say.

In Jewish society, women were basically property. With few legal rights, women were at the disposal of the fathers and husbands. A man could divorce his wife for any reason, even if he were to decide to "trade in" his wife for a "new model." All he had to do was write out a statement that he was divorcing his wife.

In such a society, with women dependent on fathers and husbands for their livelihood, divorce was devastating to women. Read the book of Ruth in the Old Testament to be reminded how destitute widows, unmarried women, could be.

4

Greek society was even worse: married women were to remain hidden in the home. Their husbands could consort with as many women as they desired, all out in public. Jesus' teaching establishes compassion by establishing a new responsibility: husbands were not to summarily divorce their wives, just because they found a more attractive woman. They were to remain married, take care of their wives.

Mt. 5:33-37

You have heard it said, "Do not break your oath." But I say to you, do not swear an oath at all. People swore oaths to convince others they were trustworthy, they were telling the truth. We do the same thing today: "Believe me," "By God..." Jesus expands the requirement about oaths: don't use an oath at all. Let your actions prove your trustworthiness. Let your words demonstrate you are believable. Jews thought they were invoking God's presence when they used an oath. When we use an oath, we really aren't invoking God's presence for God is omnipresent: God is here when we speak, when we act. God is a partner is how we treat others and what we say about others.

Mt. 5:38-42 contains three teachings about vengeance, retaliation and judgment. You have heard it said, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek also.

The law stipulating an eye for an eye actually was the beginning of mercy. As we have read throughout history, including our own US history, too often when a person from a clan or family was injured, that clan or family would seek vengeance, even killing the entire opposing clan or family (Think Hatfields and the McCoys). Jewish law provided a measured response: if a family member had an arm broken by a rival family, only the offender's arm could be broken in retaliation.

On the face of it, this sounds like a just law. You hit me in the eye, I can hit you in the eye. We both suffer the same injury. Fairness and justice.

5

But Jesus says no. If someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the other. Jesus is setting a higher standard for our response. More recent study of these teachings suggests that Jesus wasn't telling us to become doormats and suffer in silence. Rather, what Jesus teaches takes power away from the offender; it is peaceful resistance.

To strike a person indicated a power relationship between two people: one is superior—the one hitting—and one is inferior—the one getting hit. In Jewish society, the "appropriate" way to hit a person inferior to you was to use the back of your hand: right hand to right cheek. To hit a person on the left cheek, using your fist, was to identify that person as your equal. (Didn't I say we had to understand how life was lived in year 30, not how life is lived in 2017?!) By turning your left cheek for the other person to hit you, you put that person in a humiliating situation. You're saying to him, "You're my equal." And in this society, humiliation was not desired!

The same is true of Jesus' other two examples: give your cloak as well as your tunic. If you have to go one mile, go a second mile. A Roman soldier could command a citizen to carry his pack. Apparently over time, this practice was abused and complaints became so numerous Roman leaders had to do something. So the rule was established that a soldier could only command a person to go one mile. The soldier could be punished if anyone saw him forcing a person to carry his pack a second mile. Imagine how upset a Roman soldier would become when a Jew insisted on carrying the pack two miles: "What is this Jew trying to do?! Get me into trouble?!" Again, the action resulted in humiliation, this time of the Roman soldier.

Mt. 5:43-48 You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you.

We can feel justified in hating someone who is an enemy. They're working against us, they're trying to harm us. It's ok to hate them. But Jesus says no, love them. The Greek word for love used here, agape, is not just love from the heart but love that requires

6

choosing to love, regardless of whether the person is lovable. It is love that is unconditional—you don't get warm fuzzy feelings, you may not see any appreciation from the person you love. It is God's love for us: Love given even though we don't deserve God's love, even though we often act in unlovable ways (sin). We are to love others as God loves us, even our enemies.

In his teachings, Jesus set a higher standard. What counts is not just our external actions and words, what people can see and how well we keep the laws. What counts is our innermost thoughts, what's in our heart. "Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me," prayed the psalmist.

If Jesus were teaching today, what would be included as he says, "Tradition says, but I say...."

To whom would Jesus be speaking today

In his day, he was talking to the religious leaders—the ones entrusted with maintaining observance of the Law. However, they had gotten to the point of being focused on living the letter of the law while ignoring the heart of the law. They had gotten to the point of being focused on living to impress others with how religious they were.

The Law is important – it is worth preserving for its own sake

And that is the reason Jesus says: You have heard it said...but I say to you

My own experience being called a rebel and having to search my memory to recall my actions on staff at CBTS.

Jesus was a rebel....and we've been invited to join him to make things new. We are being entrusted with God's work, we are the hands and feet of Christ. We must be bold, we must be willing to take risks

Jesus' teachings are about loving God and loving others as we are loved. We, too, are to be rebels, even if doing so takes US to a cross!