**“Jesus Said What?!? Some Things Should Not Be Taken Literally”**

**Matthew 5:27-30**

Rev. J. Douglas Paterson

July 9, 2017

A long time ago I remember watching Johnny Carson and he had this guy on the show who could spell any word you can imagine. I marveled at that because I am at the opposite end of the spectrum when it comes to the ability to spell. I remember him telling Johnny that anyone could become a better speller. The key was knowing the correct pronunciation of the word. I never found that to particularly helpful. I diligently learned all my rules for spelling when I was in elementary school. You know: “i” before “e,” except after “c,” or when it sounds like “a” as in “neighbor” or “weigh.” We all know that vowels are long if followed by one consonant before another vowel. The vowel is short if followed by two consonants.

So, think about the word “image,” i-m-a-g-e. Given the rules, shouldn’t we pronounce it “eye-mayj?” Or take “imagine” should be “eye –may-jine.” So we are either pronouncing a lot of words wrong, or the guy’s advice on Johnny Carson was not that helpful. And by the way – and I think I have complained about this before – most of the rules for spelling that I learned in grade school don’t work for a lot of the words we use as an adult.

Akin to this is the fact that there are a lot of words we do not use correctly. In written English it is hard because we have so many homophones – words that sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings. Like “here” and “hear,” “buy” and “bye,” “bear” and “bare.”

In the spoken English there are words that sound alike that we interchange by mistake like “masticate” and “machinate.” Machinate sounds like it should be masticate, because you are mashing something when you are chewing it. Or “ruminate” and “remunerate.” I am sure no one wants to be paid with someone’s ideation. And while ruminate is the same thing as masticate, it is also the same thing as machinate, even though masticate and machinate are two different things.

And sometimes words are used in the colloquial that after years have moved us away from the radical of the word, like the word “radical.” Often when we hear the word “radical” we think of something out of the ordinary, something that is way out there, beyond the usual, out of the norm. The root meaning is almost just the opposite, and rather ironic, because the root of “radical” means the root of something, the basis, it is what is fundamental, or that which is derived from the fundamental root of something. Now it is true that if you look up the word “radical” the 3rd or 4th definition has to do with something that is extreme. But the Latin from which it comes refers to the root of something, the basis.

Remember that, because it will become important in a moment, and because language, and how we use language, is critical when we try to interpret Scripture.

We are doing a sermon series this summer on “Jesus said what?!?” I invited input from you all on sayings of Jesus that are hard to understand or don’t seem to fit with who we think Jesus is or what he stands for. Like last week when we catch Jesus calling a woman a dog. Or the week before when we read that Jesus said, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” They seem counter to what we have been taught. So, how do we reconcile some of these passages?

This week we find ourselves in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount. We all remember the Sermon on the Mount being filled with some pretty cool stuff, right? It includes the blessings for the poor, the meek, and downtrodden with which the sermon begins; the fact that Jesus considers us the salt of earth and the light of the world. He opens up the meaning of the Law of Moses, and he helps us understand that he is not looking for rule-followers, but heart-followers. But then he throws things in like what we hear in our Scripture today. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, chop it off.

I cringe every time I read that passage. When I was in college, I had a roommate who was dating a woman who was attending a pretty conservative Christian college. One of the requirements was to attend chapel regularly during the week. In one service this passage was used and the preacher hammered home pretty hard the ridding yourself of everything that causes you sin. It is even better that you cut off your hand if it is causing you to sin because it is better to be maimed in this life than to miss out on heaven where God will make you whole again.

School went on spring break shortly after that. When classes resumed, there was one young man who came back without a hand. Officially, he had an accident and they had to amputate it. The rumor that the student body and his friends were grieving about is that he took the preacher seriously when expounding up this passage.

So, we have these sayings in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus is expanding our understanding of the Law of Moses, that we might grow into greater righteousness than just abiding by the law – than just being rule-followers – and they follow a particular pattern. It is a three-fold structure that Matthew uses. First there is a reaffirmation of the Law of Moses. When Jesus begins this teaching in 5:17 he says, “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.” Matthew, remember, is speaking to a Jewish community and he reassures these new Christian prospects that are Jewish that Jesus is not advocating for the abolition of the Torah. Jesus’ teachings do not transgress the Law, but radicalize it.

Okay, remember what radical means? It is the root of something. Now this is where it gets confusing. When Jesus says that “You have heard it said, (i.e. the Law says), do not commit adultery, but I say to you don’t even lust for another,” we think “whoa!” That’s pretty radical, only we are not thinking that is the root of the sin. We are thinking that is way out and fairly extreme. It doesn’t sound like Jesus is getting back to the basics, it sounds like he is raising the bar a little high.

This is the Jimmy Carter sin, right? Do you remember when Carter was running for president and he had an interview with Playboy magazine when he admitted to sinning by lusting in his heart. I mean, if Jimmy Carter couldn’t meet this standard . . .

But for Jesus, it wasn’t about setting a higher standard. It was about getting at the root of why there was a law to begin with. For Jesus, this law on adultery isn’t about sex outside of marriage. That just happens to be the symptom. The root of the law is about the ethic of love and respecting one another: treating each human being as the God-inspired creature that they are, not as some object. And, of course, during the time of the Law of Moses, which is embarrassing to say, women were the property of men, so respect your fellow man, gentleman, and do not steal his property, or even desire that you could have it.

So, Jesus reaffirms the law; radicalizes it – gets to the root of why there is a law. Then the third part of this three-fold structure is that Jesus creates a situation on how the radicalized law is applied.

Now for Matthew, the last part is important because the community of Jesus is being called to live out the perfect will of God. Jesus represents the advent of the Kingdom of God, but Matthew understands it is not fully here yet, so there is the tension to live out the “perfection” of God (which we are going to talk about next week) with the fact that the old kingdom still exists. The new age has come in Jesus, but the old age continues and we need to deal with it. So, Jesus’ prescription for living in this in-between time according to Matthew, is to rid yourself of anything that causes you to be less than perfect. If your eye causes you to lust, blind yourself. If your hand causes you to sin, chop it off.

It is this prescription to self-mutilate that I think was the concern of the person who recommended this Scripture for the series. If not, I apologize, but it is my concern.

Earlier we talked about the importance of language when interpreting Scripture. Words matter, and how we use the words matter. And because, as we discussed in early sermons in this series, simple translation from the original language already can skew the meaning of the original intent, we need to be careful with the words. In fact I have a strong belief that if you want to take Scripture seriously, than you cannot take it literally. And that is true for several reasons.

One, because of the translation issue that we just commented on.

Two, writers of Scripture were less concerned about facts and more concerned about truth. We’ve talked about this before, too. It is really only a modern phenomenon that truth equals facts, or that facts equal truth. Since the enlightenment when humanity began to measure better; see further with the telescope and discover the universe is not designed the way Scripture says it is; see smaller with the microscope and discover smaller organisms that can cause joy and havoc; as we have grown in our knowledge of things we have moved to believing something is only true if we can factually prove it.

The problem with that, as we interpret Scripture, is that in our modern mindset Scripture can only be true if it is factual. And so we get into crazy arguments like the universe had to be created in six days, even though our greater understanding of the universe would lead us to something different, because if Genesis is not factual about the creation of the universe, then we cannot trust Scripture to be true at all. That’s simply hogwash.

What we forget is that stories can be truer than facts when it comes to faith. Consider Aesop’s fables. Not one of them is factual, but no one would deny the truth they purport. We do not have to understand things literally to understand the truth. That is very important when reading and interpreting Scripture.

It may not be factual – that is literal – that the universe was created in six days, but that has nothing to do with the truth Scripture is trying to relay. The point we are to take to heart is that God created and is creating. That this creating God of ours, like any artist, or builder has an intimate relationship with that which God creates. God is not far off, abandoning that which was created, but intimately cares for and nurtures this creation of God’s imagination.

Truth is actually larger than facts. Truth is actually more literal than facts. Truth is the radical of facts. Facts can point us to truth, but ultimately it is truth that defines the facts. Stories, factual or not, have the greater ability to get us to the truth than facts alone. That is why Jesus taught in parables. Stories have the ability to relate us to the truth better than facts. And sometimes part of story-telling is the use of hyperbole – the use of the extreme to drive home the point. Or, if you really want to get convoluted, let’s use our modern understanding of the word radical – taking something to the extreme.

So, when Matthew has Jesus teaching on the mount about adultery, he becomes radical in all senses of the word. He takes us to the root of the real issue of adultery, the lack of respect for others. And he takes us to the extreme, using hyperbole saying that it is better to maim yourself than to disrespect others. We are not to take Jesus literally here. We are to take him seriously. The ethic of love requires much of us. In the kingdom of God, our respect for others must be at least equally important, if not more important than respect for ourselves. That’s the truth of our Scripture today.

And I pray that will be true in your life and in mine. Amen.