**Big ‘Buts’ of the Bible: The Jesus Paradigm**

**Matthew 5:38-45**

Rev. J. Douglas Paterson

February 11, 2018

Here we are. The last of the big “buts” in our sermons series. I’ve had fun doing this series, and I’ve learned a lot. Even with its light hearted approach, I hope this series has been meaningful to you, and has taken all of us to a deeper understanding of God’s gracious movement in our lives.

You might recall that we began this series with a quote from then Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes during the 1923 Pan-American Conference. The Americas were feeling out their relationship with one another. This was after WWI and it was a pretty sensitive negotiation with a good bit of tension.

It is said that Hughes gave specific instructions to his translators: “While a running translation is ample for my purposes, you must take great care to give me each and every word after any speaker says ‘but.’” His understanding was that words that follow “but” in conversation are often the most important words.

We’ve been using that strategy in our Scripture reading. We’ve been paying close attention to how and when “but” is used, and how the conversation changes after its use, or how the message might be refocussed.

We first saw how “but” can abruptly change the conversation when Jesus, talking with his disciples about who people thought he was, then asked, “But, wo do you say that I am?” It is a “but” that moves us away from the theoretical to be intentional. When that question is asked of you and me, it requires us to make a life altering decision one way or another. It becomes a game changer.

We then saw how Moses used “but” when God requested that he go back to Egypt and free the Hebrew people. It’s probably similer to how all of us use “but” when God is asking something of us. We try to argue with God by saying, “But....” followed by what we might consider some very good excuses why he should not do what God is asking of us. We don’t want the game to change. We would rather keep the status quo instead of having to step out in faith.

Last week we saw how the narrator of the Bible – anyone speaking to the actions of God in history – uses “but.” When it is combined with the word God, it creates an epic movement in our understanding of how God works in our lives. So upon the lips of Joseph we found that God can take all our human foibles and make good come out of it. “You meant evil,” Joseph says, **“but God** used it for good.”

The place where “but” gets the most consistent use seems to be in the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus is teaching the crowd and he makes great use of the phrase, “You have heard it said... but I say to you...”

We heard two examples in our lesson for today:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

There are half a dozen of these sayings right in a row in Mattew 5:

- You have heard it said, “Don’t committ murder.   
 But I tell you don’t even be angry.

- You have heard it said, “Don’t committ adultry.  
 But I tell you don’t even look at another lustfully.

- You have heard it said, “Whoever divorces his wife give her a divorce certificate.  
 But I say to you, just don’t get divorced.

- You have heard it said, “Don’t make a false pledge in the name of God.  
 But I tell you, don’t pledge on God’s name at all.”

These quick paraphrases leave out a lot of explanation. But you get the drift. Jesus is changing the paradigm of what it means to be faithful. You have heard of paradigm shift before. It’s a very plesant sounding phrase for someting that is very hard to comprehend. It’s a fundamental change in our underlying assumptions. That is, everything you took for granted, you can no longer take for granted, and you must now acquire a whole new set of assumptions.

What has been delightful is that Richard Rohr has been writing on the Sermon on the Mount for the last couple of weeks in his Daily Meditations. I know some of you subscribe to his Daily Meditations, and if you haven’t had a chance to read these, they are quite good. They are actually adapted from his book *“Jesus’ Plan for a New World.”* For those who are unfamiliar with Richard Rohr, he is a Franciscan friar who founded the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, and is the author of several books. I highly commend him to you.

His concentration thus far has been on the Beatitudes – the very beginning of the Sermon. But he talks about the Sermon on the Mount as the very blueprint for Christian lifestyle, and what most scholars see as the best summary of Jesus’ teaching. Rohr cautions that we have a hard time understanding this wisdom from Jesus because we are so steeped with the rational, dualistic mind. Jesus overturns the conventional and common trust in power, possessions, and personal prestige. So to understand the Sermon on the Mount this is what Rohr says:

*“We must approach it with an open heart and a beginner’s mind, ready to have these normal cultural beliefs and preferences changed. Most people were never told this and tried to fit the Gospel into their existing cultural agenda.”*

“You have heard it said… But I say to you...”

And this is how Jesus sets it up:

How blessed (or “happy”) are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.Matthew 5:3

If you will indulge me, let me again use an extensive quote from Richard Rohr:

*“Poor in spirit” means an inner emptiness and humility, a beginner’s mind, and to live without a need for personal righteousness or reputation. It is the “powerlessness” of Alcoholics Anonymous’ First Step. The Greek word Matthew uses for “poor”... literally means, “the very empty ones, those who are crouching.” They are the bent-over beggars, the little nobodies of this world who have nothing left, who aren’t self-preoccupied or full of themselves in any way. Jesus is saying: “Happy are you, you’re the freest of all.”*

*The higher and more visible you are in any system, the more trapped you are inside it. The freest position is the one I call “on the edge of the inside”—neither a “company man” nor a rebel or iconoclast. The price of both holding power and speaking truth to power can be very great. You ricochet between being offensive and being defensive, neither of which is a contemplative or solid position. Further, you are forced to either defend and maintain the status quo to protect yourself and the group or to waste time reacting against it.*

*The “poor in spirit” don’t have to play any competitive games; they are not preoccupied with*winning*... Jesus is recommending a social reordering, quite different from common practice. Notice also how he uses present tense: “the Kingdom of God*is*theirs.” He doesn’t say “*will*be theirs.” That tells us that God’s Reign isn’t later; it’s now. You are only free when you have nothing to protect and nothing you need to prove or defend. Trapped people*have*to do what they want to do. Free people*want*to do what they know they have to do. Admittedly, it takes a while to get there.* (From Rohr’s 1/30/18 Daily Meditation)

We see that when we move to the but statements of the Sermon on the Mount.

*You have heard it said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.* ***But*** *I say to you don’t resistant an evil doer. But, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to anyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

In our rational, dualistic minds, that makes no sense at all. It makes no more sense than “*You have heard it was said, you shall love your neighbors and hate your enemy.* ***But*** *I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…”*

We can think of several good reasons why it is important to exact consequences for a person’s bad behavior against us. You can’t just let people get away with things or they will always take advantage of you. People have to pay for their misbehavior.

Jesus is saying, “That is true only when you are imprisoned by your own ego.” As long as we are living out of our own egos, we will never comprehend Jesus’ wisdom teachings, nor will we ever possess the kingdom of heaven. There is a reason death and resurrection is such a central theme in Christianity. Because we really do need to die to ourselves, if we are ever going to rise to the joy of God’s kingdom. That is what’s called transformation.

As Richard Rohr put it in his blog this last Thursday:

*“Bad” people didn’t kill Jesus; conventional wisdom crucified him. Jesus taught an alternative wisdom instead of the maintenance of social order. Prophets and wisdom teachers like Jesus have passed through a major death to their ego. This is the core meaning of transformation. Yet most of Christian history tried to understand Jesus inside the earlier stage of law and order. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is anything but maintaining the status quo!*

In a way we are ending this sermons series on Big Buts of the Bible where we began, with Jesus asking us, “But who do you say that I am?” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is laying out who he is and the wisdom that comes from who he is. Do we believe him?