

That's What It's All About
Matthew 5: 21-26
Third Sunday in Lent

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I recently read a very entertaining novel, **Today Will Be Different**, and it opened with the main character sharing her daily affirmation. I think it's something many of us can relate to, so I'd like to start with this now.

*Today will be different. Today, anyone I speak to, I will look them in the eye and listen deeply. Today I'll play a board game with (my son). Today I'll initiate (sex¹) with (my husband). Today, I will take pride in my appearance. I'll shower, get dressed in proper clothes, and change into yoga clothes only for yoga, which today I will actually attend...today, there will be an ease about me. My face will be relaxed, its' resting place a smile. Today, I will radiate calm...Today I will buy local. Today, I will be my best self, the person I'm capable of being. Today will be different.*²

Don't we all have our own version of this? We make New Year's resolutions...we create Bucket Lists... We start each day vowing to eat more veggies or drink less alcohol...or, (as a little shout out to the **Hamilton** fans in my Sunday School class) to "talk less – smile more." Even though Oprah has been off the air for years, we still get up each morning wondering how to "be our best selves."

This may seem like an odd way to introduce today's Bible story, but before there was Oprah and self-help books, there was Jesus, showing, by the way HE lived and died, a way for us to live. Today's reading is part of a much longer monologue, as Jesus teaches from the side of a mountain. First, Jesus

¹¹¹ I didn't actually say this word in worship!

² Semple, Maria. **Today Will Be Different**. Page 1.

shares famous words that we know as the Beatitudes – telling people that they are ALREADY blessed by God, even in the midst of their struggles. Then, Jesus encourages his listeners with powerful words that we heard a few weeks ago, telling them that they are the “light of the world.”

What’s unique about today’s passage, however, is that now Jesus shifts from how we should live as individuals to how we should live in relationship to others. But “being our best selves” gets a lot harder when we bump up against other people, right? So let’s listen to God’s word for us today as it comes from Matthew 5: 21-26.

¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But 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. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come 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. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

My son Nolan once told me that my sermon was the best sermon he ever heard! And then in the next breath, he clarified that he didn’t actually like sermons, so that wasn’t saying much. Recognizing that some of our kids might have a similar attitude, we’ve equipped each of you with some Play doh this morning. If you’re struggling to pay attention, go ahead and pull out that play

doh. Have some fun molding and shaping it, because I'd love to see what each of you creates.

For the season of Lent we're talking about forgiveness. And those of you who have been reading Marjorie Thompson's book may recall that she describes repentance as a crucial part of forgiving others (and ourselves).

Now, I think repentance gets a bad rap. I envision the old cartoon of the guy standing on the street corner wearing a sign reading, "Repent! The end is near!" This implies that we NEED to repent because we are so awful! Or because God is really mad at us and we will be judged. But that's not what Jesus is saying.

Repentance comes from a Greek word that simply indicates turning around, or turning the mind around. As Thompson says, when we turn *away* from our own egos and turn *toward* God, then we begin to notice the people in our lives we have misjudged and mistreated.³ And so, we are *invited* to repent, not because we are so awful but because God is so good! God's love for us is so amazing that when we experience it fully, we want to respond.

And so how do we respond? Well, not by trying to be perfect. We respond by acting differently toward others. We look to reconcile – to live in harmony with the people we have hurt and who have hurt us. I want to be VERY clear about one thing – Jesus doesn't say that reconciliation means that we have to continue to live with someone who hurts us and who will continue to abuse us. Jesus does tell us that our relationships are vital. Being reconciled to one another isn't simply "nice to do" or "icing on the cake". It is, Jesus says, absolutely essential to loving God.

³ Forgiveness: A Lenten Study. Page 39

To illustrate this, Jesus (who is prone to exaggeration), tells his listeners that if they reach the altar to worship God and remember that they have offended someone, they need to reconcile before they worship. Now, Jesus' listeners in Galilee were three days walk away from the temple in Jerusalem. Imagine that someone arrived at the temple after a sweaty and dusty trip...shelled out the cash for an animal to sacrifice... and were just about ready to worship God when they recalled that a neighbor had a grievance against them. Well, that person needed to stop in their tracks, walk home, make peace, and then walk back to the temple to worship⁴. I think Jesus was really serious about this one!

And it's not enough, Jesus says, to avoid killing each other. We don't get to name call. No judging or blaming or shaming. No anger! Not just because those kinds of actions can lead to murder, but because every time we get angry, and we let our anger smolder inside, *we become a little less of the human beings that God made us to be.*⁵ And Jesus practiced what he preached. When he was betrayed, arrested, and condemned to die, Jesus had the opportunity to fight back, to save himself and to condemn his accusers in the process. But he didn't.

Lent is a time when we remember this story because it's a chance to "try on" Jesus' way of living. It's 40 days – which feels like a long time if you've given up chocolate or ice cream – but in the big scheme of things, it's a manageable time to try on something new. Rather than view this as a burdensome task, I've come to see Lent as a time to lighten the load. I once received a greeting card that read "what if the hokey pokey really is what it's all about?" Now, I know that this is just meant to be silly, but what if the hokey pokey really is what it's all about?!

⁴ Wright, N.T. **Matthew for Everyone**, 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

Well, that means that you can “turn yourself about” anytime, at any age! I can too. We can practice a new way of being for 40 days with the intention that when Lent ends, we carry the change forward. Friends, we are like this play-doh – we can shift and change. We can place ourselves in God’s hands, and allow God to re-work us into new and different shapes and forms as we grow into the people God calls us to be – both as individuals and in our relationships with one another.

Friends, I am like this play doh. I came here nearly 10 years ago in the shape of a recent seminary graduate, a new parent, just a year or two out of the business world. In the time that I have been here, God has re-shaped me, formed me, turned me into a pastor. And God has done that through you – through our relationships. And for that I need to say THANK YOU.

You have ministered to me – when Rowan was born and we were showered with dinners and gifts and a hand knitted blanket from the prayer shawl team. And you ministered to me this year when so many of you reached out just to say, “how are you doing” or “how can I help” or even – hey, I know you’re taking on a lot of extras at church right now...if you need me to pick up your kids for you (I’m serious – one of you amazing people offered that!)

Kids, YOU have ministered to me. Last fall, I was ministered to by a two-year old newcomer who plopped in my lap during the Word for Children! And I was ministered to by the kids on the Family Retreat who took turns walking alongside me on our hikes, who played games with me, who sang songs together with Miss Kimberlee’s guitar playing. My third and fourth grade Sunday School class – you minister to me each week as you pray for each other and inspire me with your rich and thoughtful conversations.

There is a ridiculous amount of change going on right now. Some of you aren't sure how you are going to come out on the other side. But you are having the hard conversations, you are healing, and you are speaking the truth in love with one another. I pray you will keep working through all of this because this is a resilient church, filled with people who love God and love each other.

And I pray that you will also be ministered to by our children as you figure out how to “be church” in the future. I'd like to share some words of wisdom from one of our children. This particular child is actually a young man by now, and I was able to ask his permission to share this story.

Years ago, during Advent, Karil Curran was leading our Sunday School kids to imagine all the ways we could prepare our hearts to receive Jesus. The children shared any number of lovely and appropriate ways:

Bake cookies

Sing a song

Beautiful. And then, just as we were coming to a close, Doug Barnhart volunteered this: Have hope.

If we had dropped microphones 9 years ago, that would have been the mic drop: Have hope.

Jesus tells us to live in peace and harmony with another – to reconcile with one another – because he knows we can do it. He doesn't set us up to fail by offering “pie in the sky” ideas that we can't possibly hope to achieve. He knows that if we hold on to anger or we judge or name call, we are less than the beautiful people God created. Jesus knows we can do it because he, and

God's holy spirit are at work among us. Jesus knows that we are ever changing, ever shifting works in progress. AND he knows that our hope lies in God and -- because of that -- we have hope in one another.

And that's what it's all about! AMEN