

God of love, teach us your Word and help us to understand it and live it out, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

This is the 4th week in a row that the Gospel reading comes from Matthew chapter 5. This is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the longest recorded sermon of Jesus. It takes up three solid chapters in Matthew.

Jesus' preaching style is... disjointed, at best. He speaks in short sentences or paragraphs, making point on top of point on top of point. The messages of the Sermon on the Mount are concise, with very little elaboration or explanation before moving on to the next topic.

It almost sounds like someone was taking notes as Jesus talked, and they just wrote down the bullet points of what he was saying, like a good student does when listening to a lecture by an effective professor.

The short summary points lend themselves to modern communication too. Since January 23, when I started preparing my sermon on the Beatitudes, I have been tweeting the Sermon on the Mount. I share one verse or paraphrase of a verse on Twitter each day.

For those who may not be familiar with Twitter, a user is allowed to post an update that is 140 characters long. Other people can see that update, then comment on it or re-tweet it to their own page. Twitter forces the user to be concise, which sometimes is helpful and sometimes causes great confusion.

You can use the symbol that is officially called an octothorpe – which most of us know as a pound sign or a number sign, and that Twitter calls a hashtag – and attach it to a word in your tweet in order to make it searchable to other folks on Twitter.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
Hashtag SermonontheMount.

Tweeting the words of Jesus has been an interesting spiritual practice these past few weeks.

It was easy in the Beatitudes – blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Those verses are pretty uplifting. And Jesus' words remained encouraging for a few more verses.

You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden.
Hashtag witness.

Then things started to get confusing.

Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of legal experts and Pharisees, you’ll never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Is he saying that the Pharisees are the model of righteousness, so we should emulate them and then try to do even better? Or is he saying that they’re so *unrighteous* that it wouldn’t take much to be better than them?

And how do we translate that to our faith life today? Who is considered to be righteous in our society, and who do we need to exceed in righteousness in order to enter the kingdom of heaven?

And, perhaps most confusing in this verse – is Jesus saying that we need to *earn* our way into heaven by being righteous? This flies in the face of everything that Lutheranism stands for, based on Romans and other letters of Paul, that specifically state that salvation is a result of God’s grace, and has nothing to do with our own works.

Things didn’t get much clearer after that.

In last week’s Gospel, Jesus told us, “You have heard it said, ‘don’t murder,’ but I say, anyone who is angry will be subject to judgment.”

Well, that’s harsh. Who in this room has never been angry?

I’d be surprised if even half of us could say that we’ve made it through a week without getting angry. Even if we’re generally levelheaded people, when someone cuts us off in traffic or calls us names or publicly insults a demographic to which we belong – it’s hard not to get angry!

We’d never murder anyone, so we know we’re not breaking a commandment. But then Jesus changes the game, he reworks the commandment, and says that those who get angry with a brother or sister are liable to the same judgment as a murderer.

I guess this is why we need to confess our sins, as we did at the beginning of worship – it’s impossible to live up to Jesus’ standards, so we need to continually ask for God’s forgiveness for our missteps, no matter how hard we try to be faithful.

Last week we also heard:

Settle matters quickly with your accuser who takes you to court, or you will be thrown into prison.

There are all kinds of contemporary applications for this passage, most of them not particularly helpful or life-giving.

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. And if your hand causes you to sin, chop it off! It is better to lose a part of your body than go to hell.

Hashtag toughlove.

That's a hard one, Jesus. And anyway, how do we know which part of our body causes us to sin? Our brain might decide to steal something, but our hand does the stealing, and our legs bring us into and out of the place where we've stolen it. So what are we supposed to do? Destroy our whole body? I don't think that's what Jesus wants – after all, we're told today in First Corinthians that our bodies are God's temple, and if anyone destroys that temple, then God will destroy that person.

This is where a little explanation from Jesus would be helpful.

But we don't get any explanation. All we get is the next point in his sermon:

Whoever has a divorce, except for sexual infidelity, commits adultery.

Wait, what? That's bad news for many of us, who have been divorced, or who have relationships with divorced people.

The most generous explanation that I've heard for this passage is that Jesus is protecting women in a roundabout way. Women weren't allowed to divorce their husbands, but men could divorce their wives, and they didn't even need a reason.

As we know, in the society that Jesus lived in, a woman had no social standing without a man to support her – a father, husband, or son. She would be left to beg, or to take on the world's oldest profession.

So Jesus *may* have been trying to protect women in his day. But what about in ours? What does this passage mean for people living in an abusive marriage?

What about financial infidelity, or one of the countless other causes that result in a broken marriage in our day and age?

Hold that thought – we'll come back to it in a minute.

After the bit on divorce, Jesus tells the disciples, "You have heard it said, 'do not break your oath.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all. Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Basically, he says, live up to your word, and don't make any promises that you can't fulfill. Simple enough. Hard to do, but simple enough!

That brings us to the reading from Matthew 5 that we heard today.

You have heard "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But Jesus says, do not resist an evildoer.

What? Of course we need to resist evildoers. In the baptismal rite that's printed in your bulletin, that we're using later this morning, we publicly renounce all forces of evil that defy God, all powers of this world that rebel against God, and all ways of sin that draw us from God.

Except that Jesus was preaching to an oppressed people in a nation occupied by a foreign empire.

Maybe that makes a difference in how a person can resist an evildoer.

It certainly comes into play in verses 40 and 41:

If someone wants to take your coat, give your cloak as well, and if someone forces you to go one mile, go the second also.

These were specific allusions to actions that the occupying Roman forces took against the people, just to show their power. And Jesus is saying, if you find yourself on the receiving end of the empire's oppressive laws, endure them with grace. Don't let them get to you. In fact, make it look easy. Carry that Roman soldier's stuff two miles instead of one.

Embarrass them. Reveal the ridiculousness of what they are asking you to do. Be like the prophet Nathan who said to David – you are the man! You are the one who is guilty of doing evil!

This is what Jesus means when he says, if someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the other also. He doesn't mean you should go out looking for trouble. He certainly doesn't mean that you should stay in an abusive relationship.

By putting this command right next to the one about the coat and cloak and going the extra mile, Jesus is drawing a direct connection to resisting the empire.

You don't resist an evildoer by plucking their eye out when they pluck out yours. You resist an evildoer by exposing the true nature of their actions.

Non-retaliation has the effect of shaming the powers that incited the violence in the first place.

While preaching to people who were living under an oppressive empire, Jesus had to frame his message in such a way that it would last for generations. It wouldn't do any good if all his followers were killed off in the first few months or years. So instead of responding to violence with additional violence, he says, get to the root of the problem. Then maybe you can change the oppressive system itself.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn't really give explanations.

But he orders his words in such a way that their meaning can become clear anyway.

By stacking things on top of one another, reinterpreting the law, and giving advice that seems counterintuitive, Jesus is telling us – this is the way the world is *intended* to be. It may not be how the world is now – at the moment, the empire might be in

control, and you might feel like you're on the losing side of history – but eventually we're going to get there.

Jesus will be explicit about this a few verses later, in Matthew 6, when he teaches the disciples the Lord's Prayer and tells them to pray, "your kingdom come, on earth as in heaven."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is describing the kingdom of God, and encouraging us to help it along its way to get here.

He's reinterpreting the law for a new time and place, and reminding us that love and reconciliation are primary. Don't get so distracted by the old laws that you neglect to love your neighbor and even your enemy.

This brings us back to that piece I told you we'd come back to. Remember that? Jesus had some hard words to say about divorce.

Reinterpreting the law for a new time and place, he refocuses the old commandment about divorce on the values of love and reconciliation. Instead of allowing a husband to divorce his wife as long as he presented her with a certificate of divorce, he says that you can't just abandon a woman with no cause. He gives a new instruction that is more life-giving than the old one was.

Take the old instruction and make it more life-giving for today's world.

That's the challenge for us as we read Jesus' words. How do we take what he preached in first-century Palestine, and reinterpret it for our lives today? How can we take his commandment on divorce and make it even more life-giving?

Jesus made oblique references to resisting the oppressive power of the ruling government. How do we reinterpret that teaching with the values of love and reconciliation for our lives today?

How can we live out the vision of God for a just and whole and healthy society?

The Sermon on the Mount gives us some pretty good ideas. Some excellent ideas, in fact.

Be salt and light. Reconcile with your neighbor. Keep your word.

Hashtag FaithfulLiving.

But the Christian life cannot be summarized into a 140 character tweet, or even a 3-chapter sermon. The Christian life must be *lived*.

The last verse of today's Gospel reading sounds harsh and confusing again. Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

But the word "perfect" can also mean complete or whole, when something is brought to its intended goal.

The Christian life must be *lived* – in reconciliation with enemies and in protest to oppressors, and with integrity – only then can it be brought to its intended goal of wholeness and love.

Beloved friends in Christ, be perfect, complete, whole, living out your Christian life as well as you can, interpreting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount for your life today. *Then* the meek will inherit the earth and the pure in heart will see God. And the kingdom of God will arrive here on earth, as it is in heaven.

As Jesus intends it to be.

May God make it so.

Amen.