

Jesus' Kingdom Agenda (2)

Matthew 5:21-48

I begin this second introductory sermon to the Sermon on the Mount by making this observation. When it comes to certain situations and decisions, there may be said to be the wrong thing, the right thing, and the Jesus thing--that is, what Jesus teaches. I say this because in this section of the sermon on the Mount--which we will yet go into detail about--Jesus cites what most of his listeners thought was the right thing, and he counters it with what he says to do. He challenges the conventional religious--chapter and verse--thinking of his time. He teaches differently--things that fit into the kingdom he is proclaiming and living, and commands his followers to proclaim and so live.

But before we go into the details of it all, we need to understand more exactly how the Gospel of Matthew wants us to understand this teaching of Jesus. Matthew is comparing Jesus to Moses. And it is clear that Jesus is presented as the “greater than Moses” Teacher and Son of God. No one was greater than Moses in the Jewish world, especially because he was the One whom God gave the Law on Mt. Sinai to deliver and teach to Israel. But clearly, Matthew wants to show that Jesus and his teaching is greater than Moses and the Law. So the similarities and comparisons are many and quite obvious, but you have to know the story of Moses from Exodus.

First, Jesus going up on the mountain to deliver his “sermon on the mount” is an intentional similarity to Moses getting the commandments of God on Mt. Sinai. Moses’ story in the Book of Exodus begins with his birth, then tells of his rescue from Pharaoh’s murder of the Hebrew baby boys. Jesus’ story in the Gospel of Matthew begins with his birth and then tells of his rescue from King Herod’s murder of the baby boys in

Bethlehem. Moses had to be rescued from Pharaoh's intention to have Jewish babies killed, and Jesus and his parents had to flee from Herod's doing the same thing. Moses and the people were sojourners in Egypt (for 400+ years), and then returned to the land of Canaan/Israel. Jesus and his parents spent a sojourn in Egypt to escape Herod and then returned to Israel (up to Galilee, Nazareth). Moses and the people spent 40 years in the wilderness before entering into Israel. Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness before entering into his ministry. Through Moses on Mt. Sinai, God gave the people of Israel the Law, the Commandments. Through Jesus on the mount, God gave his people this Sermon. Moses was the first prophet in Israel over its long history. Now, Jesus is presented as God's New Prophet, God's New Moses--but more still.

And there is this: For Moses, as for Jesus, going up the mountain was about going up into the presence of God, where God gave Moses the Law to give to the people. Now, while the Law was certainly a large set of rules and commandments by which Israel was to structure and live her life as God's People, the Law was also a sign and symbol of God's merciful and powerful deliverance--salvation--of his people. After the rescue and deliverance from Egypt, Moses went up and was in the presence of God who spoke to him. But when Jesus "*went up the mountain*" "*and sat down, his disciples came to him...and he taught them,*" (Mt 5:1-2). And whereas Moses went up the mountain and was in the presence of God and God spoke to him, now when the disciples join Jesus on the mountain, He is God's presence. God is speaking to them through this Jesus, the Son of God--the "*greater than Moses.*" Now, in this Sermon, God speaks. As the disciples were told on the Mount of Transfiguration later, "*This is my beloved Son... listen to him,*" (17:5). And Matthew closes with the words of Jesus: "*Go, therefore,*

and make disciples...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you...”
(28:19-20).

Now secondly, this connection between Moses in God’s Presence and Jesus as God’s Presence is closely associated with the idea of deliverance or salvation. When Moses first was on Mt. Sinai and God spoke to him (Ex 3), the purpose was for Israel’s deliverance. God said, *“I have heard the cry of my people...and I have come down to deliver them,”* (Ex 3:7-8). The one who gives the Commandments--the Holy Lord--who delivers. This is why the first commandment begins, *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...you shall have no other gods before me,”* (Ex 20:2). The rest of the first three commandments then make clear there can be no idol we make for ourselves that is our God or deliverer; and why the name of God may not be used for anything that is out of accord with the love and purpose of God.

Similarly, the remaining of the Ten Commandments speak to matters to deliver those who are vulnerable and in need of deliverance. All workers--including slaves, animals, and immigrants--need the Sabbath day for rest to deliver them from being overworked. Elderly parents are vulnerable to neglect or abuse must be honored. The person vulnerable to murder need a society that protects and delivers them from that. And likewise with the protection from false witness, stealing (kidnapping, really), and covetousness that could lead to stealing others’ possessions. In other words, God and God’s commandments are about God’s deliverance from the forces that threaten human life and society. But they are also about the presence and care of such a God, who delivers his people and embrace them in his rescuing love. So is the Sermon on the Mount.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a way of deliverance for a people who need it just as desperately as their ancestors did when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt. On the mountain, Jesus brings the message that the kingdom of God is becoming present. Now, we need to be clear here. What Jesus' original hearers needed to hear, we need to hear and believe. Jesus' message of the kingdom--the reign of God--means the presence, power, and blessing of God in our lives. That is the meaning of salvation. Jesus' message is that through him, God comes to be present again to deliver us from our slaveries, from our mistaken ways of anger and pride, our unfaithfulness and self-deceit, our materialism and greed, our self-serving agendas and aloofness from God. Such things are no less real and enslaving. It means that we must be serious and ask ourselves, do we acknowledge these things Jesus addresses himself to as real for us? Do we acknowledge that these things of which Jesus speaks our slaveries, too? Because we must do that--that is we must hear the bad news--before we can receive the good news that is here.

For in fact, Jesus sermon on the mount is filled with good news, if we are pre-pared to hear it. Now, the Sermon on the Mount--as I sought to make clear last time--is first all, not about what we should do. It is about what God is already doing. It is about God's presence NOW, the breakthrough of God's kingdom in Jesus NOW. It is about God's grace and love that reigns with him and those who truly follow him NOW. It is about the loving deliverance from all kinds of bondage--some addressed in the beatitudes, some addressed in these "*You have heard it said, but I say unto you...*"s. God's great salvation is for the world, for people in community, for a new way of living that contrasts with the old--and not only the old, the familiar, the comfortable, and ways

we frankly prefer over Jesus' way. The challenge of Jesus does not change when we become Christian. In fact, it may, it should intensify. When Jesus spoke, he was talking to religious people, who knew the "right" answers. But Jesus gave them something different, something else. Do we really want that, too? That's the challenge for us--to hear--really hear--and accept, and conform our lives to the Jesus Way. And when we do, we discover we are being delivered. We discover the presence of God anew. We discover the life God intends for us as his people.

So, I say it again: The Sermon on the Mount--if we hear Jesus correctly--is not about human effort to be better or trying to live out impossibly religious ideals. It is about the good news of God becoming present to us in Jesus. It is about God doing something new for us and the whole world. It is about God's delivering justice breaking through in Jesus and into us. It is about what happens when disciples--followers of Jesus' Way--are themselves freed, healed, and become as gracious as their master to others. It is about people who discover what God is now doing in the world, as he did 2000 years ago when people first heard these words. It is about living in the presence of God now and discovering where the presence of God is with and in others, including those different from ourselves in all sorts of ways. I hope that not only by the end of this series, but during it as well, you can say with me what I think Jesus wants to hear every one of us say with the heart, "Praise God! God is doing something new and wonderful here! And I have a part in it!"

The apostle Paul summed it up well when he said in 2 Corinthians 5: *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation: everything old has passed away; see, every-thing has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through*

Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us....For our sake he made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might embody God's faithfulness to redeem the world,"

(vss.17-21). That is what Jesus is teaching us in the Sermon on the Mount--how with and through him, we embody the redeeming purpose of God for the whole world.

I don't know if it's the present political season we are in right now, or if it's the way the whole world is right now. But the challenge of Jesus to much present political and religious opinion that is bandied about these days is no different than it was in Jesus' day really. And Jesus' words are no less striking or upsetting or challenging then than they are today. The people that Jesus talked to were sure who their real enemies and who the dangerous, threatening people were around them. The religious authorities could give you chapter and verse to prove beyond any doubt who must be excluded and discriminated against for the sake of the preservation of true religion and themselves as God's "good people." But Jesus said differently.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, there may be said to be the wrong thing, the right thing, and then the Jesus thing. If we ask why Jesus differed with his religious contemporaries, as we shall see, it has to do with how he read the same scriptures they read but emphasized different things. And he did so because he read the scriptures and preached them through his own experience of his Father's divine love. It was his own intimate relationship with God that provided for him the grid of reading, interpreting, and applying them. For many Christians, we have done just the opposite. Either because

we have not really known the radical love of God for us or maybe because we just don't really like what Jesus says--if we're honest--or maybe we haven't heard it preached, for whatever reason we have tamed Jesus. We've domesticated him to fit our social, political, and religious agenda and fit him neatly into our lives so that WE feel safe and secure. It's much easier to retreat within a fortress of "us versus them" religion, promising heaven for us and hell for others, than to bother with the messy business of forgiveness and loving our enemies, which is extremely hard work. Too often, we have chosen to live with deeply held and entrenched illusions about our lives, or the lives of others, or the world as we perceive it. Think of how many Christians--perhaps we ourselves--use God to hope for victory over some enemy, or as has been said of late, "carpet bomb them to hell," whether the enemy be a nation, a people, a terrorist group, a political party or candidate, a religion, or even a sports team--all of which are in direct contradiction to the life and teaching of Jesus!

But the good news--and the wonderful corrective--is that the living, reigning Christ will not be tamed and domesticated by us. He defies our confinements and explodes our "right" categories. Indeed, the message he preaches is in the business of shattering our illusions. But know this: therein is our deliverance, therein is our salvation. Because, you see, he wants us to know the radical love of God He shares with his Father. And he wants us to participate in the radical transformation of the kingdom of God He embodies--that is, to be his People.

Let me close with this. Perhaps, no one in US political history was more abused than Abraham Lincoln. Demonized by the South, considered incompetent by both Northern Democrats and many in his own Republican party, Lincoln nonetheless persevered

in a Christian spirit. He somehow--by his Christian faith--hoped, prayed, and believed what many did not. At his Second Inaugural in March 1865, Lincoln said these words: *“On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago [Mar 1861], all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil-war. All dreaded it -- all sought to avert it...Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came..... Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding...Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other...The prayers of both [sides] could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.*

Fondly do we hope -- fervently do we pray -- that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue....so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which we may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

You see, that is reading the Bible like Jesus. And if we want to read it like Jesus, we must read it through Jesus' eyes. We must read the Bible and practice our faith as if Jesus really does make all the difference--Jesus, not religion, not tradition, not our own cherished illusions. And when we do, there is God's Kingdom. There are the People of God, the People of Jesus Kingdom Agenda.” Amen.

