

## “Living the Word”

Matthew 7:21-27

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Ever since I was tall enough to reach up to open my father's sock drawer where he kept hidden the bronze star he had been awarded in World War II, I have been hungry to hear his stories about that conflict. I have wanted to know what he did, how he felt, how the war changed him. But like many other sons and daughters, I found that my father didn't care to talk about it. In the last ten years, I have read a dozen books about World War II, most of them written by post-war baby boomers, like me, who wanted to understand what life was like in the trenches and on the seas and in the skies. But it turns out that our soldier parents didn't talk much about it. When the time came to ship out, they did what they needed to do. The deed was in the doing, not in the talking about it. I came to respect that and I finally quit asking. But I remember the bronze star in the sock drawer, and I know it represents something he did.

I thought about all of that this week as Memorial Day drew nearer, and then I thought about it again as I began to read the lectionary texts. Chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel comprise what we commonly refer to as 'the sermon on the mount'. This lengthy discourse is riddled with challenging invitations. In the lesson for today, Jesus invites his followers to move beyond simply talking about lofty ideals such as love and peace and justice; and begin to actually engage in these ideals. One can talk the talk only so long; then the time comes to walk the walk. After awhile, talk becomes cheap. Words lose their clout. The invitation from Jesus is to hear the Word of God and then to live that Word.

Jesus says the one who lives the Word is like a person who built a house upon the rock. The storms came up and the winds blew, but the house on the rock stood firm. He says the one who is just full of talk is like the person who built a house upon the sand. The storms came crashing in and the winds blew and that house fell to pieces. In other words, there is something enduring about the person who hears the Word of God and then chooses to incorporate that Word into his or her lifestyle.

Where the idea of living the Word of God becomes most challenging is here in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus invites us to love our enemies. I can imagine sitting around the breakfast table talking about this as a possibility, but the thought of actually living this out, loving my enemy, makes me squirm a bit and makes me wonder if this Christianity is asking too much of me.

Last Sunday, we attended the college graduation of our nephew at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. They had an impressive array of keynote speakers and dignitaries and recipients of honorary doctoral degrees. They had all of the colored hoods and hats and mortar boards I associate with pomp and circumstance. But the only thing I remember for sure from the two and one half hour ceremony is the graduating senior who spoke for his classmates. He introduced himself as an Israeli citizen. He then spoke about the importance of friendship. And then, he spoke of the dearest friendship he had made on that campus over the four years, a friendship with a Palestinian student. He expressed his gratitude for a university campus where two young people, raised as enemies, taught to loathe the other, could discover each other as the individuals God had created them to be, and where they could embrace each other as friends.

As he spoke, the dark gray clouds literally split apart and the sun shone upon us. I felt I was in the presence of God. I felt like I was in the presence of one who had chosen to move beyond talking about peace and had chosen to do something personal, something constructive about it.

He was receiving a bachelor's degree, but I wanted to award him the bronze star. It was as I imagine it was on that day when Noah released a dove from the ark and the dove returned with an olive branch in her beak. A new day had dawned. I don't know what will happen in Israel and Palestine, but I do know that these two friends at Clark University allow me to believe that peace has a chance. It really is possible to love the enemy; to actually do it, and not just talk about it.

My experience at Clark University gave me a good glimpse of the Realm of God. When I thought about those two unlikely friends, I thought about our local church here in South Glastonbury. I thought about how our church is really like that campus, a place where people who might not think of themselves as natural allies can discover each other and make lasting friendships, and contribute to each other's wholeness, each other's salvation.

South Church is a campus where a German rocket fuel scientist, at age 93, can be best friends with a high school sophomore, each contributing to the other's dignity. It's a campus where a person like me who grew up in a homophobic school spewing epithets such as fag and queer and dyke, can receive a prayer shawl knitted by a gay man who loves Christ as much as I do. It's a campus where the descendants of the 100 Years War eat from the same communion loaf and nail shingles on the same roof. It's a campus where a cello player who relies on delicate finger tips and a football player whose finger tips resemble sweet potatoes both find ways to use their hands to build up the peace.

It's a campus where the Word of God is not simply discussed in polite circles, but where the Word is lived.

In the early 1980's the United Church of Christ published a church school curriculum that offered three different strains: Knowing the Word, Interpreting the Word, Living the Word. A lot of churches jumped on the first two, but not so many the third. It was discouraging to Christian educators that we had to choose among the three. After all, Knowing the Word matters. Interpreting the Word is essential. But in this Sermon on the Mount we hear Jesus pushing for that third dimension, Living the Word!

It made me think about shopping for a new pair of shoes. I like to go to a certain store on Park Street in West Hartford. I like to look at every single pair. Sometimes I pick up a shoe and feel whether it has enough give. I chat with the sales clerk about insoles and arch support and comfort. But I know, and the salesperson knows that the only way I am going to know about these shoes is if I put 'em on and walk around town for a few days. I will have to take a risk and buy a pair and try 'em on! I will have to LIVE in the shoes. Talking ABOUT the shoes won't be enough.

This is precisely what Jesus is saying about the Word of God. Talk is good; but LIVING the Word is what actually allows us to have a life-changing, faith-deepening experience.

In that same Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel, we hear another challenging Word, "Forgive those who trespass against you." This, too, is the Word of God. Is it not a Word easy to talk about but difficult to put into practice? Those who trespass against me are the ones who trample on my feelings. They are the ones who treat me with disrespect. They are the ones who devalue me. Intellectually, I know I'm better off if I can forgive them.

Intellectually, I know it will be like a poison removed from my system if I forgive those rascals. But living it, actually forgiving someone from the heart, is quite another deal. This can be almost as difficult as loving the enemy.

Alexander Pope, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century poet, wrote, “To err is human, to forgive is divine.” I believe this must be true because the sacred is revealed in us when we speak those mighty words, “I forgive you.” Other words I can think of reveal our humanity. These three reveal our divinity.

On that fateful evening of the day I lit the match and carelessly disposed of the cigarette that nearly burned down my parent’s house, they took me out back for what I thought would be the punishment of my life. I was fully prepared to see in them the revenge I clearly deserved. So, when they spoke those precious words of grace, “We forgive you,” and later by their actions demonstrated those same words, I saw in my parents a glimpse of the divine. I saw that forgiveness is nothing to sit around discussing like we do a sports page editorial; it is something we must live.

Tomorrow, I’ll be somewhere on Main Street watching the parade. And I know that from time to time I will get distracted. I will call to mind those people I have known who have walked the walk, who have heard what needs to be done and have done it, who have heard the Word of God and lived it. Look for me near Day Break Coffee Roasters. I’ll be there, as I am here, standing in the greatest of hope. Amen.

