

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 5, and 18 – spiritual practices

I'm taking the last of my vacation time week after next. I've been contemplating going up to Yellowstone and fly fishing in the park. Due to flooding there in 2022, and due to it being late season, there is only one campground open, 16 spots, on the famous Slough Creek, which I would like to hike up and fish and try not to get mauled by a grizzly bear. But the problem is, only a couple sites open up for booking at a time at exactly 8am. I have tried three times now, finger poised on the book now button as soon as it turns 8am, and each time, somebody else has managed to click on it a nanosecond earlier. I imagine there is probably a thousand people or more all poised at their phone and computers trying to click on those one or two spots as fast as possible because there is nowhere else to camp within the park, leaving 998 of us left out. Furthermore, all descriptions of fishing in the park in September talk of wary fish because they have been hammered all summer by thousands of fishermen, the fish looking up at you warily with sore mouths.

My point is that even my efforts for solitude and serenity and wild involve competing with and navigating around masses of people all vying for some similar experience. There is no simple parsing apart of the personal and the communal, our actions always affecting others, especially in an increasingly crowded world. As I have gotten older it has become more poignant and noticeable to me that concerns of jealousy and coveting what others have were in the top ten commandments for what it meant for Israel to be faithful to God and a community to themselves.

The personal and the communal are always interconnected. And the clearest expressions of our faith affirm and reflect this. It is unfitting to be all spiritual and pious while selfish and ignoring the needs of others, or exploiting others for your own benefit. When asked what all the law and prophets' instructions boil down to, Jesus' answer is to love the Lord with your whole being and your neighbor as yourself. Love of God and love of others is intertwined, as is the love for oneself.

Like my desire to disappear into the wild of Slough creek only to realize I may have to stand in line to get into the stream, you may come to worship and prayer and want to block out the world and the strains and constraints of life, to forget the people that irk you or that you have to go back home to or back to work with, to just focus on the personal and spiritual. And then the pastor has inconveniently chosen these passages from Matthew, particularly chapter five, which says that if you have an issue with a brother or sister, then leave your offering and go be

reconciled first. It is a stark reminder that faith cannot be fulfilled in a purely personal way, but rather it is fulfilled and expressed in one's relationships and one's actions and responsibilities towards others. And worship and our relationships and actions towards others ought to be aligned.

In Matthew five, Jesus affirms that injunction to love your neighbor, affirms the prophetic emphasis on justice and being in right relationship with your community, though he is specifically referencing the sixth commandment in this instance, do not murder. However, he takes these instructions about responsibilities towards others, that traditionally were understood or measured in terms of outward action, and adds an inward dimension, applying it to feelings and motives and anger and grudges and sadness. So not only is your worship and piety supposed to be built on or matched with right actions and justice towards others, not only are you not supposed to physically murder anyone, one's worship and spirituality is now to be aligned with right feelings and thoughts towards your neighbor. Anger, insult, name-calling – these rise to the same level of seriousness.

I began last week an emphasis on spiritual practices, reading our scripture through the lens of spiritual practices. A spiritual practice being any regular action or activity that deepens our relationship to the Lord and the world around us. But if to be a faithful disciple of the Lord, we can't just block out relationships and responsibilities, then our spiritual practices are not just about personal prayer or rhythms, they must extend into the realm of relationships and responsibilities towards others, and our hopes and desires for good relationships and meaningful ways to help.

But the problem is, that while we may get the general principle, the actualities on the ground are far muddier. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." What is not specified, however, is what qualifies as having "something against you." That is a pretty vague category, don't you think? That could be anything from, you haven't returned my calls to why did you steal all my money. From tension and frustration to a punch in the face. Who gets to define this? What qualifies as have something against another? Who arbitrates this?

And another problem with this general category of "having something against you" is that our personal meters that detect and measure such things have a great range in sensitivity. I think of a person back in my Hudson Valley Young Life days who I had to work with. The type that when they were attached to an idea ran roughshod over everybody else, roughshod over facts as well, in pursuit of his vision. So,

when he might bring his offering to the altar, there might be a list of people who have something against him, but his meter didn't even go off. He could worship in clear conscience, seemingly oblivious to how he was received or experienced by others. And then on the other end of the spectrum are those with hyper sensitive meters, feeling badly and guilty and questioning everything they said to others, afraid they have insulted or hurt someone's feelings. And everything in between.

So, what qualifies as "having something against you?" And furthermore, what qualifies as being reconciled? Is it merely stating a perceived offense? What if the issue is not clear to diagnose, if the parties involved don't perceive the infraction the same, what if the relationship can't get back to where it was, or to some better place? How do we qualify this standard of reconciliation. I tend to have a high standard for what reconciliation means, to be restored to some place of trust and open communication and warm regard. But that is not always possible. Others may have a much more manageable notion of reconciliation, something like forgetting and moving on.

And Matthew 18's injunction to go to someone who has "sinned against you," and confront it directly, we are led into similar gray areas of what qualifies as "sinning against you," and what qualifies as being reconciled, and furthermore, what level of inner reality, of feelings and motives and attitudes, would Jesus extend this to? And in my years of working with people, I've seen such direct communication and confrontation be productive, and I've seen it go poorly, and I don't have full confidence in the simple principle conveyed here.

But one thing does stand out to me, in terms of a shift Jesus is making in these statements. You see, in Jesus' culture, in general rather broad-sweeping terms, one did not confront directly. In an honor-shame culture, you don't call out another person, you don't address sins or insults or hurt in a direct manner lest you shame or embarrass another, and you most certainly would never ever do it to someone in a superior position, like a parent, or person of status, or a boss. Instead, you handle things in round-about ways, scheming and what-not, to resolve an issue without ever naming it or publicly calling someone out or directly confronting the issue. We saw this dynamic over and over in the Jacob stories over the summer. Jacob and Laban, for instance. They keep pulling these blatantly underhanded moves on one another that have huge implications because they have competing interests, they have different stakes in the game. But they rarely confront it directly and work out a solution, lest 1) they shame each other or blow the whole thing up, and 2) lest they have to relinquish part of their plans or desires. So, they just keep trying to work their interests in devious and indirect manners.

With this backdrop, we can see that Jesus is going contrary to cultural and ingrained patterns. Rather than these indirect and scheming ways of handling differences and offenses, one is to go directly to one another, to acknowledge and be reconciled. To handle things face to face, and in such a way that changes or restores a relationship – to be reconciled, to resolve and move forward together. And for the one being confronted, there is a relational responsibility to resolve it even if you have the upper hand and there is nothing the other can really do to force you.

Jesus is changing the game to a degree. Changing the rules in such a way that might foster relationships and community. Where not only clear physical outward offenses are acknowledged and addressed, but also the stuff of the heart, like anger, and jealousy, and bitterness, and scorn.

We still come back, however, to the fact that these things are gray and unclear, and we are not likely to agree on the level of offense or the degree of reconciliation possible. And even if we do there is the matter of determining who is responsible for feelings of hurt or anger? Is the person being confronted clearly responsible, or is there some projecting onto the other unfairly? Given such quagmires, our attempts to resolve may lead to greater confusion or tension.

So, what do you do? One approach, the typical approach of pastors and preachers and book-writers, is to try to spell it out, clarify a common standard, and encourage everyone towards it. That is a challenging task, to identify a clear standard for everybody for what “having something against another” means and what reconciliation means for every relationship. This is where approaching the question through the lens of spiritual practices is helpful.

For responding to these scriptures through the lens of spiritual practices changes the focus a little. Rather trying to figure out exactly what these terms mean, and how to fulfil the standard of reconciliation in some perfect manner, we instead ask the question of what choices or patterns might I establish for myself that might move me closer to the Lord and to being more faithful in my relationships and responsibilities towards others. How do I begin to wade into the questions and to be more aware and attentive, to find the things that I might be able to do, rather than be paralyzed by the ambiguities or magnitudes?

One place to begin is start to name things, even if only for oneself. I believe that is part of what Jesus gives freedom and responsibility for in these passages. Because you can't ever go to someone directly if you can't name or say what the offense was. For instance, Jesus says if you are angry in your heart towards someone, then

leave your offering and go be reconciled – that presupposes the ability to name the anger, to put words to the emotions that make you want to call someone names. You can't confront someone, or bring the elders with you if you cannot put your finger on the issue, on what went wrong, or why this is such a concern. A place to begin might be to acknowledge how things may not be as they ought, or as you would want between you and another.

And if we were to engage, perhaps in a personal journal, the endeavor to name things, to acknowledge things, to think about what one might even say, then we might also start to see more clearly the various ways we have been shaped or conditioned to respond to such things. To recognize our typical responses. Some of us run away, some get confrontational, others downplay, saying "it's really not a big deal."

Our poem speaks to the way a community changes over time, how the ways we come to relate to each other change over time. It tries to name what has changed. Having lived on a dirt road for a time growing up where you would look and wave whenever you heard a car, I can relate to the poem, especially in a day and age where people seldom make eye contact, where they drive into their garages and interact little with those who sleep about fifteen feet from them. The poem speaks to a depersonalizing of communities and interactions. We don't know the characters around us, nor have meaningful ways of showing care. Again, what the poem does well, in my opinion, is to try to name what has been lost and how relationships might improve. But there is a pitfall also, that the poet may risk falling into. It is idealizing some moment in the past, as if it was perfect there, and we need to get back to it. The better question might be how we might take meaningful actions for ourselves towards remaking community, and better relationships.

These directives of Jesus concerning relationships have a particular application within the church, within families or groups where we have put trust, where we have aspirations for doing better. In this way, the ten commandments were partly so that Israel could be a unified community with and for each other. And so, actions and dynamics between people and families is of utmost importance, why you don't wrong one another or let wrongs go unaddressed. Our world and communities are far more mixed and complex that it was for ancient Israel. And applying these principles to our lives has significant challenges.

May God give us the words to name, even if just for ourselves, the ways things have gone wonky, the hurt or the tensions or the anger or the bitterness. And may God give us some steps, some practice that might move us closer, closer to the

Lord, closer to one another, closer to love of God and love of neighbor and love of self, letting go of the pressure to get everything perfect, but moving forward as faithfully as we know how.

And all God's people said... Amen.

Psalm 119:33-40

- ³⁰ I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I set your ordinances before me.
- ³¹ I cling to your decrees, O LORD;
let me not be put to shame.
- ³² I run the way of your commandments,
for you enlarge my understanding.
- ³³ Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
- ³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
- ³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
- ³⁶ Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
- ³⁷ Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
- ³⁸ Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.
- ³⁹ Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.
- ⁴⁰ See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.

Matthew 5:21-26, 18:15-20

Concerning Anger

(Lk 12:57–59)

²¹ “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.

18: 15-20

Reproving Another Who Sins

¹⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Poem: “*Neighbors*” by James Crews

Where I’m from, people still wave
to each other, and if someone doesn’t,
you might say of her, She wouldn’t
wave at you to save her life—

but you try anyway, give her a smile.
This is just one of the many ways
we take care of one another, say: I see you,
I feel you, I know you are real. I wave

to Rick who picks up litter while walking
his black labs, Olive and Basil—
hauling donut boxes, cigarette packs
and countless beer cans out of the brush

beside the road. And I say hello
to Christy, who leaves almond croissants
in our mailbox and mason jars of fresh-
pressed apple cider on our side porch.

I stop to check in on my mother-in-law—
more like a second mother—who buys us

toothpaste when it's on sale, and calls
if an unfamiliar car is parked at our house.

We are going to have to return to this
way of life, this giving without expectation,
this loving without conditions. We need
to stand eye to eye again, and keep asking—

no matter how busy—How are you,
how's your wife, how's your knee?, making
this talk we insist on calling small,
though kindness is what keeps us alive.