

He Spoke with Authority: The Law and the Prophets

Matthew 5:21-26

Wayne Eberly

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Snow is a wonderful thing. We've been here in New England for two years now, and our love of the snow has not waned. I don't know that it ever will. I hope that it never will. From watching our future daughter-in-law play in the snow for her very first time...how happy she was to frolic and slide...and then rush back to the warm inside, to the shared joy of children when they hear the good news that it is time to play for school is cancelled and it is a snow day, we have continued to be giddy with excitement whenever the forecast is snow. So when Thursday came this week with a forecast of 100 percent chance of snow, we hunkered down at home ready once again to celebrate the blessing of living in a winter wonderland. The snow did not disappoint. In fact, in a serendipitous way, the snow helped me in writing my sermon.

The passage before us this morning is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is preaching. In this particular portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is referring to things the Jewish community would have been very familiar with. He is referencing commandments and teachings of the Jewish Law, some taken directly from the Ten Commandments that had been given to Moses on Mount Sinai. We just read the verses where Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'" The command against murder is one of the Ten Commandments. It is literally written in stone. And then Jesus goes on to say that the words about murder mean more than we ever imagined, for he associates things like getting angry with our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings, and speaking harsh and insulting words against our sisters and brothers, our fellow humans, anger and harsh words will lead us to the same judgment as if we had committed the act of murder.

He follows that by quoting another of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit adultery." And as with murder, Jesus goes on to say that adultery is not just the physical act of having sexual relations outside of the covenant of marriage, but even looking at another person lustfully is committing adultery of the heart. And then he goes on to marriage and divorce.

So how did a snowstorm help me in writing a sermon about murder and hurtful words and adultery and lusting after others and divorce? The snowstorm helped me because I was struggling with how to bring these words before you, before us, in a way that didn't pile on to the regrets and failures we might well have. I have witnessed the pain people experience as they go through divorce. I have witnessed

the heartbreak and disappoint caused by adultery. The looking at others with lust in our hearts has led quite a few people down the path of pornography, at times resulting in addiction and despair. In a few cases we have walked with families through the devastation of murder. And in countless cases, too many to number, too many to remember, we have all seen the way that words can wound, and even ruin relationships. So my fear is that as Jesus addresses these crucial and vital and extremely important aspects of life, my fear is that the wounds we carry and the failures we have experienced, along with our shortcomings and regrets can make these words of Jesus words of judgment. I was struggling with how we can find the good news of the gospel in these words Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount.

As I sat struggling with this it began to snow. As it kept snowing I would look out the window, still fascinated by those fluttering flakes that fall so effortlessly from the sky, slowly covering the ground in a wonderful, white blanket. Maybe it is because this snow thing is still so new and fresh to us, but I never fail to think of the passage in the prophet Isaiah where a people whose lives were marked by sin and failure and shortcomings receive the good news that even though their sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. (Isaiah 1:18) Finally it dawned on me that the Beatitudes begin with a snow storm. The first words Jesus says are, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And then, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Do you hear God's grace in those words? If you find yourself poor in spirit, realizing how low you are, aware of your brokenness, your shortcomings, your failures, your disappointments, the wounds you carry and maybe the wounds you caused, then you are in the right place. The gentle snow of God's grace and mercy falls upon those who are poor in spirit.

And those who mourn. Along with the mourning of sadness and grief and loss, there is also the mourning at how we have not lived in ways that honor God and we have not loved our neighbor. Even so, as we mourn God comes alongside us to bring comfort and healing and forgiveness. Just like the angel promised to Joseph before the Christ child was even born, "You shall give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with a snowstorm, covering our sin and our past, our brokenness and our despair, our shame and our regrets.

Our past is covered in a blanket of forgiveness. As Jesus speaks to us he is not beating us up about our past. He is showing us the way forward, the way to walk, the way to live, the way to love God and the way to love our neighbor. Jesus is showing us the way to live by faith, the way to live with faith, and the way to live through faith. The righteous will live by faith, and Jesus wants us to live. He really wants us to live into the fullness of right relationships, with God and with one another.

So after covering us in a pure and white blanket of snow, Jesus plows a path for us to walk. One thing we have come to appreciate about a snowstorm is how plain and obvious a path is when it is cleared through a fresh covering of snow. Jesus takes advantage of the snowstorm, that complete covering of God's grace and forgiveness, to clear a path for us and to say, "This is the way, walk in it."

Isn't it interesting that when Jesus clears a path for us, the path looks very familiar? The path has the same markers as the commands God gave to his people back on Mount Sinai. In fact, Jesus begins his teaching about the way to walk with God by saying, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." So he doesn't abolish the commandment that says, "Do not murder." Of course we do not murder. Life is sacred. Jesus doesn't abolish that command when he shows us the path forward. He doesn't abolish it, but he sure fulfills that command. He fills it full of meaning. When he brings in anger and hurtful words we realize we can destroy life in numerous ways, and not just when we commit murder.

Believe it or not, there was a time when it wasn't so clear we should not murder. When Cain rose up against his brother Abel and murdered him, God asked Cain where his brother was. Cain's response lives in infamy. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Some commentators think his question might have been sincere. What if he didn't really know that he indeed was his brother's keeper, and that to take the life of his brother was against everything God intended for creation. So to clarify and to make abundantly clear, the commandment was given, "Thou shalt not murder." Or in the affirmative, you are the keeper, the preserver of life, of the life of your brother and your sister and your fellow human being. To that command about murder Jesus tells his followers your words and your emotions can destroy life...or...or...or your words can preserve life, and build life, and nurture life.

If what Jesus says about our words and emotions is true, how can we avoid words and emotions that destroy, and how can we use words and emotions that bring life? The Proverbs have some great counsel regarding our emotions and our words. There are things to avoid when it comes to speaking and there are things to embrace and embody when it comes to speaking.

"Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips" (4:24)

"All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse." (8:8)

"A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret." (11:13)

"A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends." (16:28)

"A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much." (20:19)

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” (12:18)

The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy. (12:22)

“Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.” (12:25)

“Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.” (13:3)

“A fool’s mouth lashes out with pride, but the lips of the wise protect them.” (14:3)

“An honest witness does not deceive, but a false witness pours out lies.” (14:5)

“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (15:1)

“The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.” (15:4)

“A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.” (15:18)

“A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word.” (15:23)

“Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” (16:24)

“A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.” (16:28)

“Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.” (17:14)

“Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.” (17:28)

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”(18:21) For more on the power of the tongue look through James chapter 3.

“Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity.” (21:23)

“An angry person stirs up conflict, and a hot-tempered person commits many sins.” (29:22)

I share these words about words from the Proverbs to show that words do matter. I share them because we have been given guidance about how to speak. The path is clear. But I also share these words about words because we live in a time, maybe no different than any other time, but this time we live in is wrought with angry words and conflict and questions about truth. This is an important time for us to talk together in ways that do not lead to death and destruction and

divisiveness. We need to talk together in words that help us come together and help us live together in ways that honor Jesus, the one who makes a path for us to walk on.

I don't have a solution for the deep divisions that seem to exist right now. But I do have a suggestion. People have found numerous ways to identify the disagreements. I have heard many say they feel stuck, not sure of a way forward. My suggestion is we use this particular time in our life as a nation, in our life as citizens of the world, in our life as members of families and communities and churches to come together around something we agree upon. That something is the word of God. That something is someone, and that someone is named Jesus. I wonder if our path forward is the path that has always been the path of those who follow Jesus. The path forward is simply to follow Jesus. To follow Jesus we need to hear the words of Jesus.

During Lent we are going to make available daily readings in this very Gospel of Matthew, a gospel filled with the teachings and the miracles and the prophecies and the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. What would it mean for a community of disciples to read the bible daily during Lent, and to ask ourselves as we read, "What do these words mean for my life? What do these words mean for us as a church? What do these words mean as we wrestle with issues of refugees, and immigration, and border walls, and national security, and the needs of ones right here in our community, and the needs of ones on the other side of the world, and the longings of the human heart, and the desire to find out what plans and purposes God has for our lives?" I don't say this because I want you to agree with my opinion on things. I say this because the challenge and the call to disciples, from those first ones who climbed a mountain with Jesus and listened to him preach to us who sit together on a cold New England morning in the pews of this very church, the challenge and the call of those who are disciples of Jesus Christ is to follow Jesus. I say this because I believe if our words and our discussions focus on the words of Jesus, the words of Jesus will not return void. They will accomplish what God intends. The words of Jesus will shape our life and help us to walk together in his path.

With that invitation to let our lives be shaped by the words of Jesus, I want to finish by inviting us to let the words of Jesus shape our lives this very day. After Jesus tells us our words and anger can hurt and destroy, he gives us a path forward when we find that our anger and our words have done exactly that, when our anger and our words have destroyed. He says go and be reconciled to someone if you have wronged them. He says go and settle matters quickly if you are in a dispute. And later in the gospel he will teach us to be people who offer forgiveness in ways that are not only expansive, they are seemingly extravagant.

In these days where there have been plenty of harsh words and emotion filled speeches and exchanges of comments online and in person, is God speaking to you this morning about some reconciliation that needs to take place in your life? When Jesus speaks he tells us sometimes it is right in the middle of worship that we realize we have some unfinished business. His words are simply, "Take care of it."

So it is that I will always remember the night our previous church had a service for healing and wholeness. A small group gathered to pray, to be anointed with oil, to seek God's blessing in some places of our lives where there was sadness, woundedness, and brokenness. We then gathered and shared the Lord Supper. Two women came to church that night that had been in a conflict that had lasted several years. Feelings had been hurt, a relationship had been broken, the wound lingered and the sore festered.

I'm not sure those two women even knew they were at the same service. They sat on completely opposite sides of the church. At the end of the service, it had been a beautiful night of prayer and worship and communion, so I encouraged folks as they left to exchange the sign of peace with one another. "The peace of Christ be with you." "And with you also." There I was, at the front of the church, watching people pass the peace with each other. After a few minutes I noticed these two women. They had started at opposite sides of the sanctuary, and they were slowly working their way to the middle, exchanging peace with others. They didn't see each other. I did. Gulp...how is this going to work out I asked myself? And then there they were. Right in the middle aisle. Right in the front of the sanctuary. Right by the table where we break bread and share the cup. There they were, two women caught in a conflict. I don't know what happened...maybe they realized they were in a snowstorm and the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ had covered both of their lives...I don't know what caused it, but I think I know who caused it. They had both heard Jesus saying there is a way forward. They both knew the Jesus who makes a path. And so there in the middle aisle at the front of the church by the table where Jesus said here is my body and here is my blood, given for you, these two women set aside their conflict. They offered forgiveness. And they found forgiveness. Hugging one another they said, "May the peace of Christ be with you." It was not immediate and it was not easy, but these two women fulfilled the words of Jesus when he said, "Go and be reconciled."

We have just had a huge snowstorm. Now Jesus is marking a path for us. Disciples of Jesus Christ, let us follow him, for he alone has words of eternal life.