

WHAT'S UP
[written in oral form]

Matthew 5:21-37
Epiphany 6, Year A

February 16, 2020
Gordon Allaby

It seems the wallpaper for our modern Anabaptist narrative features the Upside Down Kingdom. We do know that God's way is the better way / the right side up way. And, much of world behaves in the reverse, such as thinking that violence will solve a problem.

I suppose considering ourselves to have a different perspective is okay. I think it is good to look at things from a different angle [].

This is especially true when viewing our religion AND when reading the Bible.

We do not worship the Bible; it is not an end all. The Bible is more a launching rocket / an inspiration.

A nice way to prompt a different view is by asking:
"Where has the Bible taken me?" And, "Where do I need to be?"

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Has it increased my burden?

Does it cause guilt?

Does it produce satisfaction in being obedient to it?

Or,

Does the Bible give me enlightenment, more freedom and greater understanding of God?

Does it make me more loving and bring wholeness with God and all?

For me, and many people, the Bible released me to see the beauty of life all around, especially in nature. It is inspiring to sense God energy in all living things.

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The Bible can open our eyes to God's justice and righteousness.

Jesus and the prophets were instrumental in framing those perceptions, and so too were the Psalm and Proverbs collections.

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Justice is the community/collective way --divine way for living and behaving.

Righteousness is personal / our individual being and connections.

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For example, how Jesus interacted and valued Samaritans can teach us a lot about racism and uplifting those once devalued, such as the LGBTQ community.

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And then,.....there are the laws.

Laws are not simply tests / hurdles to overcome to prove loyalty and submission. Even though, many often regard them that way.

We are given instructions and laws for a reason, and it is not for blind obedience. Subsequently, it is prudent to explore the reason/ the why.

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Many of you know, we have a new puppy in our house. And, I will be quick to point out that it was Leslie's idea.

Puppies are toddlers with very sharp teeth. Our previous shepherd was great with people, yet spent his first three years on our hobby farm. He missed out on dog socialization.

So, we thought it best to get professional puppy training. The training will free him to engage in the world with less restraint. A well trained dog is freer and more content.

So, I attend a puppy class with our dog, once a week.

During the class, and for homework, we use Lots and lots of puppy treats. They are not bribes. Bribes entice and lure a creature to do something, such as shaking the treat bag to get the dog to come to you. That's a bribe.

Instead, the treats are used as a reward for desired behavior.

A desired outcome is made simple to achieve, but the dog has to figure it out. Once he does, then he gets his treat reward.

For example, to teach the dog to walk right next to my left side, not ahead or behind, he gets a treat when he does. And, many treats if he continues.

To teach him stop and get in proper position when I stop, I will stop he will look perplexingly at me as he tries to discern what is wanted, then when he, by chance, stops and sits next to me, BINGO a treat.

Puppies learn pretty fast when they get rewarded.

This technique got me thinking. I would learn pretty fast, if God would reward me with butter tarts, brownies or a fresh cup of divine coffee.

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I wonder how God does reward us?

We are not as simple as a puppy.

I wonder if peace, joy, grace and love are good enough rewards?

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My dog is learning many behaviour skills, important skills, yet there is a bigger reason behind all these little lessons.

There is a reason for the "why I am teaching him those things."

I will get to that at the end.

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I think Jesus is trying to teach us something, especially in Matthew 5.

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As I mentioned last Sunday, knowing the context of the passage is important. This section follows the beatitudes, and immediately follows the part where Jesus said that he was Not abolishing or diminishing the laws.

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Quite the contrary, and today's text reveals how Jesus expanded the laws.

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Four issues are presented, and each one is addressed with "You have heard." In other words, "This is how you understand the law or how it has been taught." Then, Jesus clarified the intent of the law, and the necessary way for being faithful to it. ~~~~ Looking at the four:

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Murder is wrong; it's evil and destructive.

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Yet, murder is the result of anger and broken relationships.

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If we deal with that / if we mend relationships then we need not worry about murder. That is a freeing notion.

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In addition, mocking, devaluing and dehumanizing people is wrong.

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It is destructive like murder.

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Adultery arises from lust, unfaithfulness and misplaced values.

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If we are Not focussing on what is truly important and precious, then we have the wrong eyes / the wrong vision.

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If Jesus was saying this today, he likely would recommend therapy, but still the intensity of cutting out an eye or cutting off a hand Does get the point across.

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He provides a good lesson / good motivation, which is we need to deal with what part of us / the reason that is luring us into the destruction of adultery.

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Next:

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Back in the time of Jesus, men could simply hand their wives a release paper. They could divorce them that easily, and sadly, life was difficult, back then, for divorced women. Moreover, they were labelled as adulteresses. Jesus points that out that divorce victimizes the woman.

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That was a terrible injustice.

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Addressing that, Jesus basically said to all men, DO NOT do it, because you will be held accountable for the future pain it causes to others. The one exception, Jesus gave, was unchastity.

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Divorce is very painful.

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These two verses were very popular, years ago, when churches were fighting and splitting over the divorce issue.

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I think some were missing the point, and instead were ultra-legalistic. They were ignoring the "You have heard that it was said...."

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Even when necessary, divorce is painful and destructive. There is no need to argue about that.

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Instead of a punishment infatuation, we could engage in "what next" which is the healing, and the grace and love of God.

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I think God wants life to continue,.....in a good way.

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The final issue is about Oaths.

To fortify one's position / one's statement, they could tie their words to something respected and honoured.

Courts have done that - *swearing on the Bible*.

Yet, if the person lied, then it tainted and devalued what the oath was tethered to. Things got messy,.....as people searched for a pure "whatever" to back up their statements.

This problem was easy to solve.

Jesus said, "JUST tell the truth, period, the end." Tell the truth.

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Trying to sort out the details of obeying the law is missing the intention of the law.

The court system contends with this all the time. That is the limitation of the legal system. A person can go free or Not on a technicality or lack of evidence. That is the court system. Moreover, the courts deal with punishment.

Punishment is NOT what desirable life is about.

The fear of punishment is Not a deterrent.

Living in fear is not a good way to live.

It is not what God desires for us. God desires what is good.

When people try to live legalistically, then yes: life is backwards and upside down.

The reason / the why for doing justice and righteousness is missed, and...as Jesus also taught,.....the HOW is overlooked.

The HOW to live justly and righteously is essential.

God wants us to be free, to fully live / to be whole.

Expecting punishment is a terrible existence.

Treats are much better. Living with reward is much better.

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Back to puppy training.

The number one lesson my puppy is learning is to always look at me.

He will come when called; he will walk by my side, when he is always looking at me / looking at cues / looking for what I want.

In essence, his driving force is asking me, "What's up?"

"What do you want?" "What do you want me to do and be?"

When looking at me is his focus, then all sorts of opportunities and freedoms open up,.....not to mention receiving rewards.

In the future, when we are out walking, and a rabbit runs by, tempting him to give chase, he will look at me for direction.

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I think Jesus was trying to show us How to live / How to focus on his way, which is God's way.

Having the right focal point may save us an eye, a hand and prevent lots of pain.

And,.....I think rewards are involved too, but do not expect butter tarts.

I wonder if freedom, peace, joy, grace and love are good enough rewards?