

“A Third Way”

Matthew 5: 17-48

We Make the Road By Walking ch. 28

Lent 2A-20

March 8, 2020

“A Third Way”

It was just my first week in a brand-new call at a church I used to serve. I learned that a member’s sister was dying, so I went to her house where I introduced myself and offered some pastoral care. Nellie was gracious, but I could tell she was sizing me up the whole time I was there. I didn’t blame her for it. I, too, would’ve looked at myself with some suspicion if I was her. Here’s this stranger you’ve never met claiming to be your new pastor standing in your living room—who doesn’t even look 30 yet—because I wasn’t.

At least, that why I *thought* Nellie was sizing me up.

I learned otherwise come Sunday, when she popped into my office after the worship service. She thanked me for coming over to her house, and then asked a question I wasn’t expecting. “Do you believe in this?” she asked, pointing to a Bible I had on my desk.

I was a bit taken aback, so I asked her to repeat herself. “Do you believe in this?” she said.

It was a simple question, but it baffled me. I assumed the answer would’ve been clear, so why did she ask it? Of course I did. I was her new pastor. I’d devoted my life’s work to interpreting and applying Scripture in a communal setting. I had prayed with her. I had just led a worship service and preached a sermon that, looking back, I realize she must not have liked very much.

So it took me a second, but eventually I realized... Nellie wasn’t asking if I believed that Scripture is the word of God, or if I believed Scripture speaks deep, divine truths about God’s will for our world and our lives.

I realized Nellie wanted to know if I interpret the Bible literally. If I believe the things the Bible says happened exactly the way the pages say it did. If I interpreted Scripture the way she interpreted Scripture.

“Do you believe in this?”

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Truth is, Nellie is far from alone in her dualistic approach to Scripture. Many—so many Christians, but also so many atheists and agnostics, too—believe the dichotomy that in order to trust in Scripture, you have to believe everything it says in a literal, fundamental way, or then you can’t believe it all. Scripture is either the written word of God as we see it on the page—word for word, even letter by letter—or Scripture is nothing more than the ancient, empty scribbling of men from millennia ago.

Unfortunately, this dualistic approach to Scripture is why segments of Christianity proclaim that women shouldn’t hold leadership roles in the church, and that wives should be submissive to husbands, and the LGBTQ community should not be permitted to marry or be

ordained, or that in order to belong to a community of faith or to get into heaven when you die you have to literally say out loud that you believe Jesus is the son of God or risk suffering eternity in hell when you die... The list goes on.

And, to be fair, many Christians believe this because, well, Scripture says so... at least it says so if it's read in a very specific, literal way.

So when people outside the Christian tradition look at the Church and try to understand what Christians believe... what they tend to see is literalism. An approach to Scripture... and thus an approach to our faith... that is dualistic. That there's only right and wrong. Fact and fiction. Black and white. Which are the very traits that tend to create cultures of exclusion rather than inclusion... and communities of judgment rather than grace... as the Bible gets turned into a weapon of condemnation rather than an instrument of love.

Compounding the issue is the perception that folks from mainline traditions with more progressive theologies don't take Scripture seriously. That we simply disregard Scripture when it confronts what we want to believe.

And while I hate to admit it, there is some meat on that bone. For in an effort not to look or seem too evangelical... too fundamentalist... what has our tradition tended to do? We've tended to avoid emphasizing practices like Scripture reading. Of pushing each and every one to grow in their relationship with the Bible. And how messed up it is that, when everything we believe—everything—should be grounded on what Scripture says, should it not?

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We see exactly this playing out in our lesson this morning from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Here, Jesus is talking to us and the crowds who've traveled to see him. His ministry has just begun, but they've already heard of this amazing new rabbi sharing these amazing lessons on life. So they come to Jesus bringing all their questions and yearnings about life... real life... life as God intends.

First, Jesus shares the Beatitudes with them—what we explored last week. He tells them if they want to live life fully, then they need to first completely redefine what success means reconsider. They need to reconsider what a well-lived life entails.

Then, Jesus offers the lesson we just read, which is nothing less than a masterclass on reading Scripture.

Over and over and over again, Jesus tells the crowds: "You've heard that it was said," before quoting Scripture.

"You've heard it was said don't murder," he says quoting Exodus and Deuteronomy.

"You've heard it was said don't commit adultery," he says quoting Exodus and Deuteronomy.

"You've heard it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," quoting Exodus Leviticus.

"You've heard it was said You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," he says quoting Leviticus.

"But what I say to you... what I say to you is that... all these verses of Scripture... all these sayings from our faith tradition... while the word of God... they don't speak the whole truth of God's will and intentions all by themselves."

He explained it further. “You see, if you want to uncover life—real life—the life God intends for you—it’s not nearly enough to not simply murder anyone. No. If you’re angry, you need to figure out why you’re angry, and then go work through it with the one you’re upset with. For God wants your relationships to be based on love, not hostility. Life is far too precious to be invested in anger.”

He continued, “If you want to live the life God intends for you, it’s not enough to be in a relationship and simply refrain from committing adultery. Love requires patience and attention. Love demands intimacy and time. So you must invest yourself in your relationship, sacrificing competing priorities in order to give to your relationship the attention it deserves. Then, adultery won’t even be an option.”

He continued, “And while the Torah says an eye for an eye... if you know God at all, then you know grace. And grace leaves no room for vengeance. For grace sees mercy and forgiveness as not only gifts to give those who’ve harmed you, but gifts to the giver as well. For mercy... not vengeance... is what leads to true life.”

Jesus concluded, “So while you do well to love your neighbor... you do far better learning to love your enemy. For that is where peace is found.”

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Amid it all, Jesus made clear, the words of Scripture he quoted were not all by themselves the keys to life in all its fullness. Rather, there is a deeper truth... a divine truth existing beneath the words of Scripture that is there to be lived *if* we invest the time and energy to dig.

But that’s the rub, isn’t it? We must be willing to dig into Scripture. To open it. Read it. And dig into it by digging through our assumptions of what life is all about. Of what success really means.

We have to dig through it all... Not just the words on the pages, but also the prejudices and fears and misconceptions we bring to them.

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Personally speaking, this has been one of my favorite parts of digging into We Make the Road By Walking, the book by Brian McLaren we’ve been reading as a church this year. Brian does such a tremendous job breaking down common misconceptions we tend to bring to faith and, particularly, to Scripture. And in chapter 28, Brian does a good job of naming it... saying Christ came, in many ways, to point us to “a third way.”¹

A third way that doesn’t dismiss the world, but neither buys into its illusions.

A third way that doesn’t dismiss worldly threats, but neither reacts to them in fear.

A third way that doesn’t dismiss faith’s traditions, but neither clings to them rigidly.

A third way that refuses to adhere to the false dichotomies that say life is either all of this or all of that. It’s either black or white. Right or wrong.

In its place, Jesus points us to a third way that understands Scripture as the foundation from which to understand all of life. And just like life, Jesus makes clear that Scripture is deep

¹ Brian McLaren, We Make the Road By Walking (New York: Jericho Books, 2014), 131.

and rich, beautiful and complex. Scripture speaks divine truth, but it also contradicts itself. Scripture points us to God, but also points us back to our truest selves.

Which means, while it may not be a literal history of God's activity in the world, Scripture is still the greatest resource we have when it comes to exploring the questions you and I, along with all the people in the crowd 2000 years ago, bring to Jesus.

So if we want to dig deeper into our questions of faith and life... if we want to explore life in all its fullness... life as God intends it... And if we want to help spread a faith that's big enough to hold not only our doubts, our fears, our insecurities and prejudices but others' as well... then it begins, Jesus says, with engaging and digging into this thing we call Scripture.

And if you need a good place to start, We Make the Road By Walking and the Scripture lessons it offers before each chapter are as good of a place as I've seen.

As you traverse its pages, friends, make no mistake... many of your questions won't be easily answered. In fact, you'll probably end up with more questions than you started. But don't think for one second that means you're not getting closer to that third way Jesus points us... a third way that isn't grounded in literal, rigid understandings of words on a page or the traditions we hold. But a way of life that is always and only grounded in God's deepest hopes and highest aspirations for our world and for us. Amen.