**"The Way of Jesus: Walking the Talk"**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, July 25, 2021**

**Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson**

**Traditional Word**

8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:8-10

**Contemporary Word**

The first step in the evolution of ethics is a sense of solidarity with other human beings. --Albert Schweitzer

Our very lives depend on the ethics of strangers, and most of us are always strangers to other people. Bill Moyers

"The Way of Jesus: Walking the Talk"

This summer, we've been using Diana Butler's Bass's book "A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story. Today, we are finishing up with the Reformation—or I should say, we are finishing an unfinished reformation, for that is what Bass repeats many times in her book: The Reformation of the Church, started by Martin Luther on October 31, 1517, is, in many ways, unfinished. Part of the reason for this is that humans often say one thing and do another. And the institutions, which are made up of humans, the churches, the apprentice lodges, the chapterhouses, the banks, even the various monarchies around the globe, often talked the talk of Reformation but failed to walk the walk. Their words and actions didn't align. They were unable to be whole. Their ethical and moral systems failed because of this disconnect.

When Philipp Jakob Spener, a Lutheran minister, pined for a truer reformation, he stated: It is not enough that we hear the Word with our outward ear, but we must let it penetrate to our heart." He believed that the problem with the Protestant Church was that the clergy cared more about theological purity than the idea of a "universal priesthood" for all of God's people. Leaders worried more about the teachings of the Church than loving God and neighbor. Rev. Spener reminded his audience that "it is no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice' and that 'Love is the real mark' of a Follower of Jesus."

As we prepare to enter into modernity next week, the question becomes this: Is our greatest commandment, the one where Jesus says we must love God and then neighbor, is this commandment enough on which we might build a system of ethics? Or do our ethics require something more permanent, less subjective—for you may believe that you love God and neighbor just fine, whereas someone else may find that your "love" of God and neighbor is insufficient. Love is subjective.

So, as church re-formers, what should we base our system of ethics upon? Perhaps it would be helpful to spend a few moments with the idea of ethics—what they are and what they are not. In our Christian tradition, from the time of Pope Gregory the Great to the nailing of Luther's theses on the cathedral door, ethics had been tightly connected to and controlled by the Church. Until Luther challenged the status quo, ethics and the clergy went hand-in-hand. During this time, the ethical life was more a sign of salvation than a condition for it—it was often performative--for show. After Luther shook things up, ethics became one of those tricky issues that were going to require a new foundation. Luther points us towards the great Protestant idea of the rugged individual, and our ethics will need to re-form to match this new self-centered approach to theology. Ethics were no longer a matter for the Church; they became a matter for the individual.

I have many people in my life who believe that you can only be an ethical person if you are a Christian. They think that non-Christians, or the "unchurched," as they are often called, lack a suitable foundation for an ethical life. But this is false. Ethical people walked the earth long before Jesus of Nazareth. And there are ethical Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, etc. Ethics is not dependant on Christianity, but the other way around, Christianity is dependant on a sold system of ethics. Bill Moyers says it best when he says: "Our very lives depend on the ethics of strangers, and most of us are always strangers to other people."

There are three classes of ethics: deontological, teleological, and virtue-based. The first, deontological ethics, is a system of ethics based on rules. Each of you, in your professional careers, were given a set of ethics to follow: physicians have deep ethical concerns regarding the care of their patients, teachers have a code of ethics concerning how they conduct themselves in the classroom, business people have all sorts of rules for the ethical treatment of their customers, their employees, even their products. Deontology then is the study of duty—of our ability to abide by the rules.

Our second category is teleological ethics, a system of ethics where the ends determine if our actions are just. With teleological ethics, the system itself may be ethical, but the ends it achieves might not be—as in the science of cloning. Those scientists have a deeply ingrained set of ethics that they adhere to as they perfect the science of cloning—the work as they see it is ethical. But is cloning ethical? Is the end result of a clone of another creature ethical? This is where teleological ethics come into play—in teleological ethics, the rightness of the system depends on the outcome. If the end result is moral, then the ethical system that got us there is moral. You can begin to see how difficult ethical discussions can be when we talk about significant situations: war, criminal justice, our drug policy; all of these things may have been arrived at by a completely ethical system, and yet their outcome—the deaths of millions in each of the classes as mentioned earlier—are not moral or good in any way.

The final major category of ethics is called Virtue Ethics: Virtue ethics is person-based rather than action-based. Virtue Ethics looks at the person's virtue or moral character carrying out an action, rather than at ethical duties and rules or the consequences of particular actions. Virtue ethics deals with the rightness or wrongness of individual actions and provides guidance on the sort of characteristics and behaviors a reasonable and good person will seek to achieve. In that way, virtue ethics is concerned with the whole of a person's life, rather than particular episodes or actions. A good person is someone who lives virtuously - who possesses and lives the virtues.

But what good is the best ethical system if you don't actually adhere to it? In the past decade, we have seen multiple examples of people saying one thing and then doing another. Many Christians are perfectionists. I don't mean that they are picky about whether or not the house is perfectly clean or that they have raised their children perfectly. When we talk about theological perfection, we mean that someone has decided that Jesus demonstrated specific characteristics and traits that we should emulate. A doctrine was then established that for you to achieve salvation, you must attempt perfection. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters have weighed their souls down with a primitive idea that they could achieve perfection. Personally, while I believe we should emulate the actions of Jesus, I think trying to live a perfect life is impossible. We're human. It's not an excuse. It's a fact. Why don't we turn towards this idea: Let's live the best possible life we can, using the actions of Jesus of Nazareth as a guide to ethical behavior. That's what Christian ethics should look like, in my opinion.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, wrote: "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, [the rules, the deontological ethics], "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this…: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Romans 13:8-10. For Paul, the Way of Jesus is love. I know that might seem contradictory, given all of the confusing things we know about Paul, but this line from Romans certainly sums up Christian ethics neatly, no?

Studying ethical systems can be maddening, especially when you start dealing with ethical dilemmas. Most of us would have no problem creating a basic set of ethics: they often feel like those rules we learned in Kindergarten—they seem obvious—play fair, be nice, say you're sorry, put your things away.

Martin Luther had two confusing principles for his basis of ethics: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, and: A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. Which is it? But he insists that any tensions can be resolved through love. For Luther, works without love produce hypocrisy. As we shift our focus to the modern Church, we see a turn from a motivation based on obligation, as we have seen up to Luther's debates, and turning towards a motivation based on intention. No longer is the individual dependant upon the Church for an ethical foundation, but we shift towards an individualistic sense of morality and ethical behavior. I am no longer an ethical person because of my affiliation with the Church, but I can be an ethical person within my own sense of self. I am ethical, not the Church. It's a subtle distinction but an important one.

Albert Schweitzer wrote: "The first step in the evolution of ethics is a sense of solidarity with other human beings." Ethics might be summed up with this idea of love of neighbor. Or listen to what the brilliant Catholic priest and Church Critic, Hans Kung, had to say about this idea of neighbor and ethics: "The Real Scandal of Jesus's Ministry [is his acts of love]. In these acts of love, Jesus created a scandal for devout, religious Palestinian Jews. The absolutely unpardonable thing was not his concern for the sick, the cripples, the lepers, the possessed . . . nor even his partisanship for the poor, humble people. The real trouble was that he got involved with moral failures [ethical failures], with obviously irreligious and immoral people: people morally and politically suspect, so many dubious, obscure, abandoned, hopeless types existing as an eradicable evil on the fringe of every society.

This was the real scandal. Did Jesus really have to go so far? What kind of naive and dangerous love is this, which does not know its limits: the frontiers between fellow countrymen and foreigners, the boundaries between party members and non-members, between neighbors and distant people, between honorable and dishonorable callings, between moral and immoral, [ethical and unethical], good and bad people? As if dissociation were not absolutely necessary here. As if we ought not to judge in these cases. As if we could always forgive in these circumstances."

I have said it more than once this summer: We are heirs to an unfinished reformation. The work that began on the steps of the Wittenburg Cathedral is still ongoing. There are still tensions between many branches of Christianity because we can't even agree on what we disagree on! Church historian Richard Lovelace believes that Christianity is a "generous way of life, a process of ongoing personal and communal Reformation centered in the love of God. Reforming doctrines and institutions in the Church was futile unless people's lives were reformed and revitalized. Lovelace insists that the Reformed Church must always be re-forming. Lovelace was interested in what happened after Luther: When Martin Luther died in 1546, Protestants began to fight over the particulars of their revolutionary movement. These second-generation leaders wanted theological clarity—and they demanded it—and they wanted church order—they wanted the Church to be ordered in a way that reflected back to the world their love of God. The new Protestant groups, the Lutherans and the Calvinists, began to fight among themselves even while debating the Roman Catholics and the Anabaptists. As Diana Butler Bass writes: "Instead of experiencing the word as fluid, Protestant leaders made their faith rigid, concretizing the passions of their ancestors into dogmatic intellectual systems. They fought real wars—like the English Civil War and the Thirty-Years War—over words. Professor Lovelace adds to this conversation when he says that…: "By the end of the sixteenth century, Protestants in both Lutheran and Reformed spheres were referring to the "half-reformation," which had reformed their doctrines, but not their lives. Christianity would go on to struggle between the head and the heart; orthodoxy and piety had been severed."

Remember Philipp Jakob Spener at the beginning of this sermon? Remember what he said about the clergy being more interested in theological purity than the "universal priesthood" of all believers? Well, he also reminded us that our convictions of truth are not faith—in fact, he said they were far from it. Instead, true Christianity is the "practice of love." And there's that subjectivity again. The Orthodox Church attacked Spener precisely because of the subjectivity of love. His theology was questionable because of this, and it weakened the ecclesiastical authority. Spener was accused of taking the Reformation too far. Jesus took his idea of love too far. Both men's ideas were too radical for the existing religious institutions of their day. But what sort of a Christianity would we rather have? One based in dogma and creeds and strict adherence to a set of rules? Rules created to amass power and control for the Church? Or would we rather have a Christianity that compels people to act in love?

I know my choice—do you know yours? How will you act in love today? Whose life will you change by your simple act of kindness? How will you continue to pour your love into this world that is so desperate for that love? How will you be a Follower of the Way of Jesus in the world today? I have faith that you will do so in love—love of God and love of the people next door. As Paul said to the Church in Rome: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor." Go and prove him right! AMEN

RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story,* HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.

Hans Küng, On Being a Christian, Doubleday, 1976, 32.