

LESSONS IN LIVING

From Prolife to Peacemaker

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:21-24; I John 3:11-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

One of the most powerful places in the scripture for me, personally, has been when Jesus is going into Jerusalem, and he stops to weep because he says, "Human beings don't know what makes for peace." However long I've been in the ministry – a long, long, time – that is a very clear lesson. Nobody gets married wanting to get a divorce, but it happens. Nobody wants to have fights in their family – in their home – but sometimes people who love each other very much find themselves drawn to this kind of conflict in a way that just seems out of their control. No nation, for long anyway, wants war, and yet, generation after generation is drawn like a magnet to the same kinds of conflicts, which, a generation later, almost always turn out to have been insane, absurd.

Yesterday I went to the March Against Hate. It was at the house where this young woman who'd been in a same-sex relationship had been killed by her partner's father. She was killed, and her mother was killed. And so there was a march to kind of reassure the survivors and the people in the neighborhood that they're surrounded by love and support. But as I was passing by that house that had been boarded up, I understood that it doesn't take a hateful person to do hateful things. Sometimes our view of love is just too small. Many people go to war not because they hate somebody on the other side of a line, but because their love is restricted to one side of the line. It has nothing to do, necessarily, with hate. Sometimes people are given a very narrow view of humankind, and so people who fall outside of that definition – they don't hate them, in their own mind, but they're able to do hateful things – not because they have feelings of hate, but because their feelings of love are so small.

So Jesus came to teach us. But for these ancient teachings to make sense, we have to make a certain sacrifice, and it's not a sacrifice that most people are willing to make. And that is the sacrifice of putting our culture within the context of the words, not these words within the context of our culture. That may seem like a really small distinction, but I really think it's ultimate. When we call ourselves followers of Jesus, and yet we're able to be cruel to one another, because of a business situation... when we've surrendered our conscience to a corporation... and we're doing things we would *never* do to another person... within that context, then the culture is the context for the Sermon on the Mount, not the Sermon on the Mound the context of the culture. When we march off to war, without asking any questions about who's on the other side of the line, when we surrender responsibility, and we kill another person, not because we hate them, not because we're bad people, but simply because we trust our leaders, I think we hear a deeper calling. I think the Sermon on the Mount calls us deeper, and I think you can change the world and maybe save the world, but love has got to be the context for the culture. Love has got to be the context for our military decisions (as hard as that is), our economic decisions, and every other decision that we have to make.

Here's the way Jesus taught it. I mean, think about this: how many medals do we have for peacemakers in this culture versus how many medals do we have for medals of violence? How many plush jobs come from serving all of humankind, altogether, versus competitive dog-eat-dog types of jobs. The things that we don't like are hidden in the things that we do like. And Jesus is giving us a formula for escaping that trap. It begins - he says, "You've heard it said, 'Thou shalt not kill.'" Now that's kind of important, isn't it? That's the sixth commandment of the Ten Commandments. And Jesus is doing a little talk where he's sort of saying there's something deeper than the Ten Commandments. "You've heard it said, 'Thou shalt not kill.' But I have another word for you. You've heard it said, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' I have a deeper word for you." He's taking the Ten Commandments and putting them in the context of love, and people didn't appreciate it, as you can imagine. Well he says, "Whenever we call another person a name, we've already started on the path to violence." Now, if you're like me, you've already done it before that becomes an obvious fact. You've already said, "You idiot!" in your head, and now the question is, what are you going to do with that? Unless you're very, very mature, and probably dishonest (*laughter*), but nobody will know, you catch yourself with these very hostile feelings, and what you're trying to do is get back from the frustration. What you're really saying is that "you're so frustrating to me right now." But it's easier to say, "You idiot! You fool!" So in this passage, what Jesus is saying, and I think this is very, very important... he's saying that's when it starts. He's not saying, don't ever do it...because you're going to do it. But he is saying know that when we turn another person into an object - and this works equally with desire - fear, desire, anger, frustration - when we turn another person into an object, that's when the violence has begun. Something has happened. The problem is not with the anger. As a human being, you're going to feel anger. The problem is not [with] conflict and struggle. The problem begins - conflict turns into violence - beginning when we objectify one another - when we call people names.

Now, for the sake of honesty, I always try to have a conversation in the sermons, and sometimes you hear who's speaking on the other side of the table, and sometimes you don't. One of the consistent critiques that I've received over the years is that I'm not fair to the military. Stunning (*laughter*) that anybody would think that. But I do want to be fair. I respect people who serve in all kinds of ways. I have nothing against individuals, in any way, shape, or form. I'm not ready for a country that has no defenses whatsoever. But when you're not being attacked, at some point, there are some questions that need to be asked. Here's a very loving email that I got - usually they are - people that are saying that I'm oversimplifying the view of the military...it says:

I was a military pilot for a short three years. The men in that program were the sharpest, most dedicated group of individuals I was ever associated with. And in the enlisted ranks, I saw boys turned into men by a program that cared for them while giving them discipline. Now on the negative side, it is true that when some of these men faced the horrors of combat and then returned to relatively undisciplined civilian life, they went to pieces. That does not mean we should ignore them, and I agree that you are right about those evils of the military. You are right about how politicians use these young men to advance their cause, but I think you should be careful about suggesting that the military experience is a negative experience. Just another viewpoint for you to ponder...

Okay, so I realize there are always two sides to a conversation. Here's the challenge I want to give us all: If the United States is attacked - Canada, Mexico, I don't care (*laughter*), I'm there. If we're attacked from an outside agent... but we're not being attacked. What we're calling defense, when it's on the other side of the world, needs to be investigated. We read this week that Kaddafi is equipping soldiers with Viagra. Did I say that right? I didn't? Viagra, thank you. Theater, theagra. Cement. Nucular. (I gotta get these words down). And if that's true, you know, your blood boils. Right? You would be doing that to equip people to rape and pillage. So if that's true, I can understand an 18, 19-year-old saying, "Okay,

I'm there. I'm signing up. I'm going to stop this." The flip side to that – the problem with that – is that also sounds like a lot of the stories we've already been told about our enemies that turned out to be untrue – that turned out to be fabrications. Does anyone remember... see, the problem is that we forget this stuff... does anybody here remember, in the lead-up to the Iraq war, that there was an eye witness presented that had seen babies taken out of the incubators and thrown on the floor? Have we forgotten? It's hard to remember this stuff, because nobody wants to believe the leadership lies to them. I don't want to, none of us wants to. But we were told that babies were taken out of incubators and thrown on the floor. It later turned out to be that the eye witness, whose last name they didn't give, was the daughter of the Ambassador to Kuwait, and an advertising agency had been paid 11.5 million dollars to do a campaign to get the American people to want to go to war. I think it's important not to forget that. If you're telling me to go across the seas and shoot somebody I never met... if I was on the other side of that power equation – if you were on the other side of that power equation, wouldn't you want somebody to make sure before they came and shot you, or your family, or somebody that you love and care about? To be a Christian means to look at both sides of all these equations. It's not easy to do.

Do you remember the words of Goerig? That was another...this is one of the most famous quotes in the world, but I don't think we can say it often enough...this is Hitler's deputy: he says,

“Why, of course, the people don't want war. Why should some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece. Naturally, the common people don't want war. Neither in Russia, nor in England, nor for that matter, in Germany. That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country that determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship or a parliament or a communist dictatorship – voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. All you have to do is tell them they're being attacked, and denounce the pacifists of lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger – it works the same in any country.”

I would suggest that this is a very ancient thing; not just with America – I'm not singling us out. But if I did a critique of the ancient Hittites, that would be less useful. If I did a critique of the Libyans and what they should do, that would be less helpful, and less topical, than asking the question “What do we need to do?” No country attacks saying, “we're just being aggressors.” They're always justifying myths. Always, always. And if very courageous people with great character believe those stories...and sometimes they're true, and sometimes they're not, but sometimes people of good character go out thinking they're defending the Homeland when they're actually leg breaking for a corporation. What I hear the passage saying is, whether you're talking about your family, your closest relationships, or international politics, when you have labeled another being, STOP and fill in the details. Look at the complexity of another person's situation. And before you act, wait until you see their humanity. You may have to respond with force, but make sure you've seen a human face first.

Then the second thing I think Jesus says is, get ready to be unpopular. Get ready for everybody to start calling *you* names when you stop calling other people names. What happens is violence gets frozen into systems. They're systems nobody wants to talk about because you can't see them. You can't see class in America, but it's there. There's definitely a pecking order. And the rich are always putting the poor down as lazy, but as soon as the poor start defending themselves, that's seen as class war. There's racism at every level – as soon as people stand up for themselves, they say, you're playing the race card. And this is the way that this frozen violence – which is what many of these systems are - what a hierarchy is – is the discrepancy of power, and of possession. So what does John say? If you see another person who's poor, and you close your heart to them, it's a question: how can the love of God be in that? So we have to

take responsibility for our lives. To believe in the free market is to renounce Jesus Christ. Right? To surrender responsibility for your economic choices, and say that the system will make those decisions, the system will guide us, this *invisible hand* will make sure justice is done...is to renounce responsibility to the One that calls us to love all, whether they're rich or poor. So it's said this way: if you look out and you see a brother or sister who is poor, and you close your heart to them, then the love I'm talking about is not there.

Now we want to talk about why this is good news, right? So that you won't just kind of slouch in your chair the rest of the day, and then we have to pour you out. What we're being called to is the kind of life that we most seek. We don't want to be grub worms. We don't want to be petty vicious people. We don't. No one does. You are not attacking America when you call America to greatness. A person who is willing for America to lie does not love the America that I do. A person who [says] it's okay for America to bully other countries; it's okay if America does not harness itself in international law or does not harness itself to the common good – does not love the America that I'm thinking about. The calling is to life – whole life. When we look at the term eternal life, it's very misleading. It's not taking your little personal life and stretching it for all eternity – that sounds like hell to me (*laughter*). And you can't really say this at Easter – though I have [said it] several times (*laughter*), but the resurrection is not about cadavers getting up. The resurrection is for a bigger view of life and of who you are and what happiness means. And it's realizing the life that you care most about in your life does not die. Let me put it to you this way: if I told you I could give you eternal life, but it would be as a toadstool, you'd never think, you'd never love, but you'd live forever, in a sense...or if I could take your toe, and keep it alive for all eternity...you wouldn't give a flip! That's not the life you're looking for. You're looking for love. And the way you can discover that's true is to go in your fear. Next time you're overcome with fear, and you're overcome with violence, go deeper into that fear, and you know what you'll discover? You're greatest fear is not of death. Your greatest fear is of abandonment, of being cut off, of being left behind, of being alone – in the deepest, most spiritual sense. When you realize that, then you realize your *true life* is this *interconnected* life.

Listen to how John says this. This is *amazing*. Good thing he didn't say it at Easter because he would have gotten in trouble. (*laughter*)

“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our sisters and brothers. What else could the resurrection mean? We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our sisters and brothers. If we refuse to love, we are still dead. This is how we know what love is. This is the core of Easter. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ died for us, and we too should lay down our lives for our sisters and brothers.”

See, the focus isn't just on Jesus; the focus is on that love – the love that animated Jesus. It's not a story about an angry God and Jesus willing to take the bullet. It's a love that will not let us go even if we do violence, but it loves us too much to let us do the violence. It calls us out of our fearful constricted views of life and of humanity and of who we are – because it's like being buried alive. We may get everything we want in life, but we're cut off from that which we love the most. If you think back to people who loved you – maybe even before you were born – that presence is alive in you now. There are people who loved you and who are not here anymore – who are more alive in your heart than some of the people that surround you now. It's not your personal life stretched out – it's the great life – the common life – that for which you long. To get to that, you have to pull back from the culture. To serve that love, you cannot serve a lesser boss. So when Jesus is going into Jerusalem, and he stops and weeps, *it's for us*, because

we keep going back to the things that hurt us and hurt each other, and this loving heart desperately longs for us to set ourselves free, so he came and he taught.

First, do not dehumanize any person. When you've called another person a name, go back and fill in the face, the heart, the hopes, the dreams. Then refuse to be a cog in anybody's machine. It's not saying you can't serve a nation. But you do it with your eyes open and your ears open and your heart open. And you don't kill somebody that you don't know on the word of somebody you don't know. You make sure. And then, finally, you know that you're equipped to do this. You know that your heart is designed to do this. There is no way *to* peace. Gandhi used to say peace *is* the way – you were the one the world has been waiting for. Live out that old hymn that we've sung so many times – “let there be peace on earth and let it begin with you.”

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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