

IS THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT STILL RELEVANT?; MATTHEW 5: 1-12;

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We live, many say, in a dystopian age: the latest consequence of climate change, Canadian forest fires that turned northeast skies into a perpetual orange sunset and toxified the air we breathe; a war in Ukraine that compares to WWII—with the added threat of the use of nuclear weapons; plus, the spread of autocratic rulers and anti-democratic movements, with a former U.S. President facing several trials for overreach and abuse of power.

There are of course our personal concerns—from finances in a post-Covid economy that has inflated the cost of everything, to the persistent challenges of daily life: job satisfaction, raising children in a complicated world, and just trying to stay healthy. Carol and I have learned of family members and friends diagnosed recently with dementia, leukemia, and heart disease.

There is, too, the Covid-accelerated drop in participation in organized religion—so prevalent it now has a name: “de-churching.” Covid shuttered most churches for in-person worship; and while live-streaming made church available at our convenience, the downside is that it prevented the rich experience of in-person relationships, perennially reported as one of the main reasons people go to a particular church in the first place.

I met with a dear friend the other day who is what used to be called a ‘pillar’ of the church. He was lamenting his lack of enthusiasm for his duties serving as head of stewardship and recently asked to lead a new mission effort.

He said he wasn’t sure if it was Covid—getting out of the habit of regular church-going or just burnout. He added that he finds spiritual nourishment these days as often from podcasts and pundits writing about the meaning of life in today’s topsy-turvy world as he does from the weekly sermon.

It’s true there’s a precipitous drop in organized religion. What is less obvious to surveys and polls is the erosion of congregational life and a shift in many churches from sustainability to the struggle to survive. The result is often to pull back finances and outreach for fear of running out of money or offending potential new members. Such reticence is often justified as prudent and responsible; but is really a disguise for fear. Shifting cultural norms and values and insular religion is not new. It is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about and the reason Jesus got into so much trouble.

I want to talk today about the relevance of Jesus’ famous sermon—for our time. Clearly, he lived in a different age but his era and ours share some uncanny parallels.

Despite the secularizing of culture and drop in church membership, the need for life-giving spirituality hasn’t changed. Spiritual hunger across the land is deep. You can see it in the uptick of glossy ads for outrageously expensive luxury items.

But a more accurate measure is the Surgeon General’s report that cites an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. From 1990 to 2021 those who said they have five or more close friends dropped by 25%; young adults report being lonelier than elderly Americans. Regardless of our wealth and power as a nation, we seem to have lost what matters most: community and connection.

Abraham Lincoln spoke to the spiritual malaise and anxiety of his time. In an age of irreconcilable division similar to ours he said in his First Inaugural Address, “Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory,” he went on, “stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

And yet, Lincoln’s era might have asked where were those angels in a land at war with itself causing more casualties than all the succeeding wars combined; *and we might ask where are those angels today* in a society that witnesses mass shooting after mass shooting and culture wars that have politicized everything from the books children read and high school drama productions to human sexuality.

There is an increasing feeling these days of walking along a dangerous precipice: in a nation divided over the legitimacy of the last presidential election, in an economy that defies predictable indicators of risk, during what may be the last opportunity to avert climate catastrophe, and, not least witnessing powerful challenges to a post WWII world order based on international agreements to keep the peace.

The question is *will we* meet an uncertain future with courage and self-discipline as the Call to Worship proclaimed today. Many retreat into indifference and isolation or sentimentality and nostalgia, or devil may care live, eat, drink be merry for today. Or worse, some subscribe to conspiracy theories or bald-faced lies that provide easy if absurd reasons for the radical change and confusion taking place in our world.

When Jesus took to the hills overlooking Lake Galilee he was living at the emotional and spiritual center of a society and religion that was resisting inevitable change.

The threat was not climate change but the presence of an occupying superpower which would, a few decades after Jesus’s execution, quash a Jewish uprising and cause a great diaspora after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

There was a palpable sense, on the eve of that rebellion, when Jesus preached his sermon that the world was about to end.

The response by the religious authorities in Jesus’ time was not unlike that of some churches today—rather than meet their despair and confront the harsh inequities of life under Roman rule with biblical faith, the Pharisees and Sadducees sought to consolidate and hold on to power, limited as it was, by enforcing rigid interpretations of the Scripture and adhering to rules and rituals that sacrificed the spirit for the letter of the law.

In other words, they were playing it safe—not wanting to rattle or unsettle their tenuous relationship with the occupation government and risk losing their control over their religious base that constituted their realm of authority. In exchange, they abandoned the justice their tradition stood for and turned a blind eye to the abuse and oppression of their Roman rulers. Not unlike some elected leaders today.

Enter an itinerant rabbi from nowheresville Nazareth, holder of no official status or degree, yet well-versed in the Hebrew Bible and remarkably similar in his preaching and teaching to the long line of Hebrew prophets. In fact, Matthew presents him as the greatest leader and prophet of Israel—Moses, but a new Moses who will give a new law and lead the people to a new land.

Matthew is writing, remember, to the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem. They are not the Gentile audience Luke writes to; they still keep kosher kitchens and recall and rehearse many of the rituals and traditions of the faith they were raised in.

Today's lesson, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount that continues for three chapters sounded for all the world to those first century Jewish Christians like Moses on Mount Sinai coming down with the tablets of the Law. Jesus proclaims a few verses after today's selection that he has come not to change but to fulfill the Law. Indeed, his interpretation of the Law breathes back into it the spirit that the Pharisees have taken away.

This sermon left no one dozing on the hillside that day. At the very start, he holds up as exemplars of faith those who were the outliers and misfits. The Beatitudes lift up those thought to be the losers least likely to receive God's blessing: the ones pushed out of the way, poor in spirit, meek, those who mourn; the ones who stick to mercy when the law calls for an eye for an eye; the peacemakers and pure in heart others saw as naive. Then he says those who are bullied because they stand by their faith, speak truth to power and are rejected by religious and social authorities, even they are blessed.

Welcome to the upside-down world of the gospel! This man who already has a reputation for going against the grain, even working a miracle, some think a spectacle so they come to be entertained; but most of them heard he leaves you with a sense of hope; that just maybe their hard-scrabble life, dead religion and world-ending fears may not be all there is.

He tells them right off they have a mission, they are like salt and light—and give zest and illumination to this brief human existence. Let your light shine, he says, so that others may see your good deeds and find their way home even in this dark time.

It's all part of something he calls the "Kingdom of God" – that has already arrived if we live like those whom he blesses at the start of the sermon; but this Kingdom is not yet completely here because there is still so much work to do. Before he talks about those he will send them to minister to, he raises the bar on their own practice of the faith. In the case of murder, adultery, divorce, *lex talionis*—the law of the land, even the treatment of enemies, he redefines what being a child of God is all about—more than going through the motions, checking the boxes of religious duty; it is living like you really trust the higher power he came to serve and calls his father.

He teaches them to pray, he tells them not to worry, he urges them to fast to remember their dependence on others, especially God for sustenance and life; and when they pray and fast and give alms to the poor not to do it while looking at themselves in the mirror of social standing or to get some reward but to do it behind the scenes and take no credit.

He says real treasure in this life does not glitter and shine but is found when their hearts are focused on the Kingdom of God. No one, not even Caesar or the IRS or death can take that from them. Ever.

He says don't judge others for you are far from perfect; and judging others is not in your job description. But build your life, your spiritual home, on the values and goals of the Kingdom, guides you can always bet on, rather than the sand of social status that washes way when life gets hard.

AO Scott commenting on the recent banning of books in several states writes, "Great writing can entertain, enlighten and even empower, but one of its greatest gifts is its ability to unsettle, prodding us to search for our own moral in the story." And Franz Kafka wrote, "A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us."

You can say the same thing about the Sermon on the Mount and virtually every parable Jesus told and some of the tough love he doled out; like the response to the man who said he wanted to follow Jesus but first had to bury his father. A response scholars say is indisputably the word of Jesus so opposed is it to all religious teaching of the time. When Jesus told that man, "Let the dead bury the dead" you can almost hear the thwack of the ax against the ice of that man's frozen faith.

We domesticate and ignore this great sermon and Jesus' parables and sayings at our peril. The only things that stand between us and the end of the planet as we know it, including tens of thousands of plant and animal life forms and human life itself are our courage, self-discipline and faith in a way of living that for 2,000 years we've been trying to get right and lately many have given up on.

Two final points and a take away. Point 1. Our 8 year old granddaughter and her parents from Connecticut were just with us for a long and wonderful Fourth of July weekend. We saw the original Huckleberry Finn manuscript at the Erie County Library; visited the new AKG Buffalo Art Gallery after downing grilled cheese sandwiches at the museum's cafe; prepared a big breakfast for the whole family with her playing waitress and head chef and I as her assistant; and heard her grandmother play clarinet with the Erie County Wind Ensemble at Bassett Park in Williamsville on July 4th. Priceless moments.

Point 2. They say the atmosphere that surrounds the earth is the equivalent of a coat of blue paint that separates us from the endless, cold, sterile abyss of space beyond. It gives one pause to consider the contrast of this tiny speck of life in an out of the way solar system with the rest of the vast, void-of-life universe. It's almost like it was meant to be, intended and caused to be by some creative, benevolent energy beyond our imagination.

The take away: Not only are the reasons to preserve and keep it a sacred duty, but we are equipped with every means to do so with brains that are the most remarkable and complex entities in the universe and hearts shaped in the very image of God; which is to say that we inherently know right from wrong. Isn't it time to step back in this gift of a summer and consider the world's children and their future and then embrace, for all we are worth, the words of Jesus and the life he calls us to!

If you sense a thin layer of frost around the edges of your prayer life or your calling to be better than yourself in some challenging circumstance of the moment, remember the awesome weight of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that can break through any barrier between you and the love and forgiveness of God.

Today is all we have. The present moment is everything!
We dare not let it slip away! Amen.