



Roanoke, Virginia

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“The Values That Keep Us Whole”

Matthew 5:17-20, 38-42

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At Bible Study on Tuesday, I saw Joy Sylvester Johnson. She has traveled all over the world, and to remote places. She told of visiting a trip on a remote island off the coast of British Columbia. She learned that slugs were a regular part of the diet of that tribe. Joy is open, and she has a policy of trying anything that is legitimately served as food. So, when slugs were served at a meal, she ate one. “I didn’t give it a chance, though,” she said. “I just couldn’t get past the ‘Yuck factor.’” You see, Joy, was open when she ate the slug, but was closed when she couldn’t bring herself to really taste it.

We can be grateful for those who are open and those who are closed. Those of us who enjoy oysters can be grateful for the bravery of the first one to eat something so slimy. But people have gotten sick eating things they shouldn’t eat. Eating one mushroom will nourish you, another will alter your mind, and still another will put you in the ground.

I had the conversation with Joy on Tuesday. I had another conversation with Elizabeth Link on Wednesday when we had lunch together at *Athens Grill*. I told her of how the day before I needed to quickly run into a gas station to get a receipt. My 9-month-old granddaughter, Emory, was in the car. It would only take me a minute, so I locked the car and ran in. The nice guy filling the tank of the car next to mine thought Emory was cute, so he tapped on the window and smiled. When I came back to the car, it was to a spooked and screaming baby. (By the way, Millie and Elizabeth both asked why I didn’t just detach the car seat and take it inside with me... but they should just mind their own business).



No harm done, anyway, because Emory quickly calmed down. At our lunch at Athens, Elizabeth said that it was good that Emory got spooked. She quoted Ruth Robertson saying to her that there needs to be some element of “Stranger Danger” for reasons we all know and don’t need to have explained. Children need to be open and go to others so they can grow. Children need to be closed and cling so they will be safe. Both true.

Listen to two passages from the Sermon on the Mount where in the first, Jesus sounds closed, and in the second, he sounds open. Can he be both at the same time?

Matthew 5:17-20, 40-42

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Same sermon, 18 verses later:

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

So, Jesus is saying in those verses, go beyond the Law. Then, elsewhere, in the very same sermon, he says the Law has to change. He talked specifically about adultery, divorce and swearing oaths.

Anyway, “The Word of the Lord!” (“Thanks be to God.”)

Maybe I should have said, “The *two* words of the Lord.”

First Word: “Preserve the past”
Second Word: “Evolve for the future.”

First Word: “Follow the Law!”
Second Word: “Follow your heart!”

First Word: “Listen to the prophets” (“You have heard it said...”)
Second Word: “Listen to a new prophet” (“But I say unto you...”)

When our Bell Choir plays in worship, most of the individuals in the choir hold a bell in each hand. Imagine Ken Lyons holding not only the huge bell they always give him that rings a deep, low note (**BONG!**), but also a tiny one that rings a thin, high note (*ding!*). Within a few measures, imagine him ringing first one and then the other.



Jesus does that in our passages. Somehow, within the same sermon and within a few verses of each other, Jesus rings both:

- a closed bell and an open one.
- a follow-the-rules bell and a bend-the-rules one.
- we could say, a conservative bell and a liberal one.

The last church I served before coming here was a church in Mississippi. Mississippi is much more complex than outsiders know, but to some extent, it is true that many in the Delta State tend to divide between black and white. True racially, though not as true as it once was, but also true ideologically. Mississippi churches, for instance, tend to divide themselves into conservative congregations and liberal ones.

Not the church I served. Briarwood Presbyterian Church was a large, fun, healthy congregation. We were not easily labeled, though some tried, because Mississippians love to label people. “Too liberal,” said some. “Too conservative,” said others.

I liked it. I liked it because I honestly think that if your goal is to love and follow Jesus, if your desire is to honor the name of Jesus and believe and live in a way that might authentically be called Christian- if your ultimate allegiance is to God and God’s kingdom- no political or social label should fit.

The reason is theological. The doctrine of the *Incarnation* is the core belief of Christians that Jesus is in some sense fully human and fully divine. There is a wholeness within Jesus. If we take in the entire witness of Jesus’ life- his words and actions- the evidence of how he lived and how he loved- we will find that within his core was this intense conservative desire to draw lines, preserve the past, honor the Law and follow it by the letter (**BONG!**); *and* we find within his core this intense liberal desire to show grace and mercy, to include, to make allowances, to bend the rules, to welcome the stranger, to hear a fresh word of the Lord, to honor the Law by honoring its spirit (*ding!*).

And, we are called to have the mind of Christ. So, if there is found in Jesus leanings which inspire both conservatives and liberals, maybe both leanings should be evident in our own hearts and minds.

That is a theological suggestion... and also a practical one. Plenty of evidence can be found in history and studies showing that individuals and communities are harmed and even destroyed when they become too closed or too open.

Some of you know how much I appreciate the work of Jonathan Haidt. He does a wonderful job summarizing that evidence. Haidt teaches at Harvard... which is to say, he got demoted because he used to teach at the University of Virginia. He’s smart. He describes how we’re wired, quoting DNA studies. He then describes about how we are shaped by our culture and experiences.

He’s smart and he’s a good writer. He tells stories. He uses images you can understand. He’ll say that the first draft of your brain was written by your genes, but every subsequent draft is



written by culture and experiences. That makes sense. Now it's easier to see how the scientists who study the brain don't have all the answers, but neither do the psychologists and sociologists.

Here's the overall story he tells: We have developed these moral values- "moral taste buds" he calls them. They have developed because they have all been essential to human survival and human thriving. We need each and every one, or we put ourselves in danger.

They are:

1. Caring, which has been defined by the negative experience of Harm- harm to ourselves, but even more to one's children who need protection.
2. Fairness, which has been defined by the experience of Cheating.
3. Loyalty, which has been defined by Betrayal.
4. Authority, which has been defined by Subversion.
5. Sanctity, which has been defined by Degradation (or Revulsion or Yuck!) and
6. Liberty, which has been defined by Oppression.

The Bible Scholar Walter Brueggemann points out in a recent book he wrote with his sociologist son that all six moral values have strong biblical grounding.

Caring: "Let the children come to me," Jesus said. And he said, "As you have done to the least of these you did unto me."

Fairness: "We are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord," Paul said. And when the Samaritan woman said that even dogs get to eat scraps from the table, Jesus looked at her and said, "Your faith has made you well." Then he took the Gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews.

Loyalty: "For the Lord will not abandon his people."¹ (That's from 1 Samuel) In return, "God only shall you serve."

Authority: The greatest command of the Old Testament is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."

Sanctity: Just think of those passages about what is clean and unclean.

Liberty: "Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery."² (That's from Galatians)

Here's the thing, though, about people within a community: different people defend different values. Just as people have different palates, so also do people have different moral palates. Haidt suggests that in America, today's liberals emphasize Caring and Fairness over the others, while today's conservatives emphasize sanctity and liberty over the others. A healthy community needs its conservatives and liberals, but too often fears are manipulated and they become enemies to each other.

Here's a stark example. Look how the many divide immediately after a school shooting. Some immediately speak to the defense of Liberty protecting the right to bear arms (but it is not

¹ 1 Samuel 12:22.

² Galatians 5:1.



like they don't care about children) while others immediately come to the defense of caring for the vulnerable and call for gun control (but it is not like they don't value liberty). If they are both defending something important, then maybe there are solutions in the middle where both values can be honored. But, when sides are demonized, those middle solutions are harder to gain, and communities become more divided and innocents suffer.

Honoring all the values keeps communities of faith strong. Consider a typical Presbyterian congregation during budget season. There are those within that congregation who can't understand why more resources are not sent to Third World countries (They lead with Fairness). In the same church are those who want to keep benevolent dollars closer to home (They lead with Loyalty). There are those who wonder why some helping ministries are supported more than others (Fairness), and others who wonder why we don't support only Presbyterian causes (Loyalty). It is hard to find, though, any Christian who can't understand and appreciate the other value. They just need to hear each other out.

What I want us all to hear today, more than anything else, is that we need to understand that often those who sound immoral to us, or irrational, or even a little bit crazy are often trying to protect a moral value that is very important to them. We still may not end up agreeing, and one might be more in the wrong than the other, but at least we can be a bit more humble since no one can keep all values in balance. We can be a bit more empathetic knowing that often the stand someone is taking, right or wrong, is taken because of something deeply felt. And we might even be open to changing our minds, or at least evolving our views given the awareness that life is complicated and competing values are still needed values.

Let's go back to the doctrine of the Incarnation. If Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, if he is the fulfillment of scripture, then all moral values find a home in his heart. If we are going to be safer in this world; if we are going to add value as teachers, parents, mentors, friends, guides, leaders, and followers; if we are going to help build communities built to last rather than implode, we would do well to get to know and love Jesus in his wholeness, and not just catch him on a liberal or conservative day. Shalom, the word for "Peace," can also be translated as "Whole." A whole person and a whole community will honor all the moral values that have kept us alive and can help us thrive.

