

Finding Our Calling in the Midst of Uncertainty

Romans 8:1-11

Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the largest single collection of Jesus' teachings, the Gospel writer Matthew records Jesus as saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Yet Jesus has an intriguing way of bringing the law and the prophets to fulfillment, as he seemingly toughens, and in some cases, reverses long-held teachings. Perhaps you recall the series of "You have heard that it was said...but, I tell you" teachings.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder;' and 'anyone that murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone that is angry with his brother, will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca', is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool,' will be in danger of the fire of hell (Matthew 5:21-22).

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (5:27-28).

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you: Do not resist an evildoer. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles (5:38-41).

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven (5:43-45).

Now that is a rather intriguing fulfillment of the teachings of the law and prophets.

I included these familiar messages from the Sermon on the Mount this morning, in order to think about how seriously we take the teachings of Scripture...how seriously we listen

to Scripture...how seriously we trust or accept Scriptural teachings...how we give credence to Scriptural teachings...how we discern and how we recognize and understand those teachings for our daily living. From our very beginnings in the Church of the Brethren, the study of Scripture has been central - not as an end in and of itself, but rather as a way of grappling with the question, "What is the quality of my commitment and discipleship?"

There are churches that proudly define themselves as "Bible teaching, Bible believing" churches. Yet their understanding of the intent of those Scriptures can be very different than ours...How is it, then, that we Brethren approach Scripture? More to the point, how is it that we search both the Scriptures and our own hearts, while seeking to discern the mind of Christ?

"The mind of Christ" ...In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 2, the apostle Paul makes a rather bold statement, "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). Now, that's a remarkable statement when you consider that one chapter earlier Paul writes that the church is sorely divided. "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you, and that you be perfectly united in mind and thought (in the same purpose)" (1 Corinthians 1:10). Then, Paul goes on to define those who follow Jesus as: persons who have rightly discerned the mind of Christ, and who embrace a markedly new way of thinking and acting in the world - a new way of living...

With each step Jesus took, he created another way of living. When Brethren through the years have considered the significance of Scripture, it has always been with an eye toward the question: "What does this passage of Scripture say to us about another way of living / the alternative way of living that Jesus opens before us?" There is power in Scripture for us...It invites us to enter into the story of Jesus...Scripture invites us to find

our place in a story that is much larger than our own. The story of God reaching out, again and again, in love towards all mankind. Calling us, inviting us, and challenging us to put on a markedly new way of living.

This is the power of this morning's scripture lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8. Paul is showing the difference between "life in the Spirit" - which is life with God at the center of our living, and "life in the flesh" - which is a matter of life separated from God, life in which selfishness, sin, hate, and death reign supreme...

What the law, the Torah, could not accomplish – ushering us into abundant life - the Spirit of Christ is able to do. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases several of the verses from this early portion of Romans 8 this way:

The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death . . .

The law always ended up being used as a Band-aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for, but we couldn't deliver, is now accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.

Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust in God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them - living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life.

There are some Christian traditions that have understood Scripture as little more than a rulebook, a series of do's and don'ts, with the greatest emphasis, it would seem, on the don'ts. But for Brethren through the years, the purpose of the written word is to point beyond itself to the living Word, to the heart and spirit of Jesus. To discern the mind of

Christ, therefore, involves grappling with the message behind the words - listening for the spirit of Christ. The question before us as we study scripture, therefore, is one of: How does this passage enable us to grasp the spirit of Christ more fully, the spirit that brings life and peace, the spirit that offers grace beyond measure, compassion that knows no limits, hope that overcomes despair?...

As Brethren, we have long understood that right listening for God's voice may lead us into a way of living that stands in deep contrast to the values of our age. A way of living that affirms that we can experience a peace that passes all human understanding even in a world marked by uncertainty, by fear, by suspicion, and by pain,. Even more, we can begin to live out that peace in our daily relationships.

I read an article by Wayne Muller titled *Learning to Pray*, where he explores the model prayer shared by Jesus that we call The Lord's Prayer. Writing particularly about the phrase, *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*, Muller questions, "What if our life on the earth is our prayer?" Muller then suggests, "We are agents of the divine spirit on the earth. The kindness of God flows through our hands, our words, our work, our actions. Today, pray with your hands. Not by clasping your hands in a holy gesture, but by using them to bring some good and necessary gift to someone in need."

Is this not the way Brethren, for 300 years, have sought to live out our calling - to embrace the disciplines of prayer and Bible study, not merely as means for our own personal growth and edification, but more as opportunities to reflect, to show, to reveal the gracious love and the overflowing compassion of our God in our daily encounters and relationships. It is a matter of embracing another way of living, of finding a new center for our living in Christ, of seeking to walk in Christ's spirit.

Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner wrote that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Isn’t this what the apostle Paul refers to as setting our minds on the Spirit who brings life and peace? The very Spirit who fills us with a new joy and purpose in our living also empowers us to live in such a way that we respond to the world’s deep hungers - hunger for a sense of community in the midst of life’s uncertainties...hunger for a sense of peace in the midst of the world’s anxieties and violence...hunger for a sense of hope for healing and wholeness in the midst of life’s brokenness and fear. Our calling, then, is to listen for and discern the voice of our God, encouraging, supporting, prodding, comforting, challenging, strengthening, guiding us into purposeful living, into abundant life and peace.

You and I are called to prayerfully study the scriptures and examine our hearts, to think about our thinking, seeking the mind of Christ, listening for the voice of our God inviting us to put on “another way of living”, a way of living based upon compassion and goodness, mercy, and peace...Continuing the work of Jesus. Peacefully. Simply. Together.

With the apostle Paul, can we not affirm the call to set our minds on the Spirit, a decision that leads to life and peace? Amen.