

Title: Don't squash the Woolly Bear

Church of the Rock June 8, 2014

Scripture: Matthew 5.21-26 The sacred valuing of human life.

Theme: Having a right relationship with God means that we must have right relationships with each other. Squashing the Woolly bear, or hurting other people violates God's heart and damages the Image bearer.

(Please stand)

Psalm 51.10-17

Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

(Open in Prayer)

Pastor Mike, Neill Brown's mother, Karen Daniel's Father.

Introduction:

We see it everyday. There is no avoiding it. Just turn on the TV, look at the news, watch on-line or listen to the radio. We live in a world where chaos rules the day. Stories of war, bombings and uprisings. Politicians bad mouthing one another all claiming to have answers to questions only they seem to be asking. One person gets angry at another and all of a sudden we find out that skeletons in closets are now dancing in the streets and on the evening news. That person, the "opposition" is taken care of, embarrassed into silence or submission. Names are thrown around intending to hurt the other person as much as possible. "Reality shows" where families find themselves for half an hour or an hour a night, taking joy in showing the whole world how dysfunctional and hurtful they can be to one another. Ratings soar the more bizarre the behavior and the meaner the attitudes. It doesn't end there on TV. These things happen everyday in our lives among people we know, even with people we love. Anger, harsh words, homes that break apart and families split. Moms and Dads can no longer find ways to be civil to each other. Love turns to hate and hate to bitterness and unforgiveness. People hold life long grudges where the reasons for them have been long lost to time.

It all started when one son decided to join the wrong side in the war. Despised by an uncle for reasons lost to time and family lore, this young man returned home and under suspicious circumstances was found dead. For the next thirty years, border and land wars, fights over livestock, and marriages to the wrong people, the crazy feud went on and on. When all was said and done and the dust cleared, four Hatfield's and seven McCoy's died in what is probably the most well known feud in American history. Angry, bitter, hard hearts over who knows what set in motion a generation of squashing the wooly bear. The lack of value found within brother / sister / family member was palpable. It never mattered if anyone wanted to make nice and settle things. Each family demanded justice. Either in a law court or on their own.

Devaluing the Image bearer or as I am calling it: **Squashing the Wooly Bear** seems to be the chaotic way of the world. The section we begin this morning in the Sermon on the Mount tackles these very issues. Just what does a restored and renewed life look like. What happens when we walk through that door of Justice and straight into the heart of Mercy? What are we to do with Mercy when it is given to us?

Over the past three weeks we have been going through the Sermon on the mount and seeing Jesus define what it means to be the true people of God. One of the key points which Pastor has touched on is the door marked justice and when opened we walk in to find the mercy of God given to us. As we look into this next section here in Matthew, Jesus is defining - not redefining

as though the Law was wrong, just how the commands of the Law would look like when lived out by true Kingdom people. This is what it looks like when we are the merciful, the pure in heart (singleminded) and finally the peacemakers. We have time to look at the first one this morning. Next week we will take a break as it is Father's Day and will return in two weeks when Pastor returns.

Jesus as always tackles the biggest issues first and he goes right away to the sixth commandment:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’” [Matt. 5.21 NRSV]

It's interesting that he starts here. It makes perfect sense in the context of God's story, but still interesting. The first order of business it seems for the people of God is to re-establish good created order. Jesus really is saying to his hearers then and to us now, 'Listen if you want to get anything right, you have to figure this one out first. God's Image Bearers cannot go about hurting each other and still think that God will be OK with them.' Our relationships with each other have to be right if we want a right relationship with God.

The Law was clear. Don't kill anyone. That was simple enough and for those who followed the law, it was after all easily defined. Everyone knew what taking a life looked like and in God's eyes it was wrong.

As usual Jesus puts a wrench in the works as he starts what I call the: "But I say to you" statements. The law actually was more than just superficial action or a box to be checked so I can go home and sit at the dinner table, smile at my wife after a really bad day and let her know: "It was bad, but at least I didn't kill anyone!" Ever have one of those days? I think we all have. The Law, as it was always intended to be was a matter of the heart. In Matthew 5.22 he defines what murder in God's sight really looks like.

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. [Matt 5.22 NRSV]

This was not a new thing. All the way back in Genesis 4 there was a struggle for the heart and God pleads with Cain. God wants him to see that how he feels inside will turn into something bigger if he doesn't master it. At this point in the story it was time to bring the offerings to God

and Cain brought his first fruits of his harvest and his brother Abel brought the first born of his herd. The scriptures tell us that God looked with favor on Abel's offering but not Cain's. That upset Cain and it is clear why. His heart wasn't right. He became bitter and God challenged him. The scriptures tell us in Genesis 4.6-7

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." [Gen. 4.6-7 NRSV]

We know that he didn't master it and the story tells the sad ending as Cain murders his brother. What ended in violence started with a heart issue. Cain allowed pride and his own desires get in the way of doing what was right. God challenged him to look deeper and understand that his heart was the issue, not what he brought to the altar. That is important for us to understand if we want to really get a hold of what Jesus is saying. So:

1-Just what does a restored and renewed life look like.

One of the issues Jesus was dealing with was the nationalistic hearts of the people of Israel. They thought in order to usher in the Kingdom of God that a renewed zeal and deeper observance of Torah was necessary. That a separation and standing against the enemy, and a hatred of those things and people who stood in opposition to Israel and the Temple would actually please God. All of that stuff was what they thought would make God happy with them and give them back their kingdom.

What Jesus is doing here is defining what changed hearts and true Kingdom people look and act like. It's about the deep issues of the heart. It's not enough to be satisfied with knowing that you didn't physically squash a woolly bear. You need to stop thinking and speaking in a manner that wounds the spirit of those who bear God's image.

So picture this. You have walked three days from Galilee to get to the temple. You have picked out your lamb and doves for your offering. You have gone through the rituals necessary to insure that outwardly you are pure so you may enter the temple and offer your sacrifice. While walking to the altar something stirs in your spirit. At that moment the Holy Spirit speaks. Jesus puts it this way:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. [Matt 5.23-24 NRSV]

What do you do with that? To literally walk that journey to reconcile with your brother or sister then meant leaving everything and walking three days to Galilee and three days back. That's how important this is. In Matthew 18 Jesus says again that if we offend or are offended we are to go to that person and make it right. No matter what it takes we need to reconcile.

However, there is something deeper here and it has to do with setting creation back in order by re-valuing God's image bearers. It is very clear from the Scriptures that we cannot have a right relationship with God whom we do not see, if we do not have a right relationship with our brothers and sisters whom we can see. We are not to demand our justice and our rights. We are to seek reconciliation and restoration instead. That's what happens in the restored Kingdom of God when his people function as they should.

What are we to do? We don't need to walk three days that's for sure. But if right relationships are that important to God our Father then we should take seriously what we ought to do with our lives. Being restored and renewed means doing things differently. Our rights are no longer the most important thing. Pride, getting our own way, and the need for justice cannot get in the way of mercy. For a takeaway I would say: Don't let our pride get in the way of God's mercy. Not only does it hinder your growth it harms others. So:

2-What happens when we walk through that door of Justice and straight into the heart of Mercy?

This is so important. Pastor focused a good deal on this door because this is where our desire to have what we want meets God's demand for restoration. On God's side of the door we receive mercy instead of justice and our hearts are restored and born again. What is being made clear throughout the Sermon of the mount is God challenging us to walk as his restored people in this world. That's why when justice meets mercy funny things happen. James tells us in his letter:

For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be

without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. [James 2.11-13NRSV]

If we are to truly be the people of God, we need to extend mercy and forgiveness to those who seek it. Even if we don't think they deserve it. Remember that we didn't deserve it either. All of us have people in our lives who hurt us or drive us crazy. I always try to remind myself that quite often I may actually be that person in someone else's life. If God has so valued us in giving us undeserved mercy shouldn't we be doing all we can to be Christ-like with the Woolly bears in our lives? We have been before the Judge's bench and have been declared free and not guilty! We should pay that gift forward.

So really it's no surprise that Jesus frames it out in terms of a law court.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. [Matt 5.25-26 NRSV]

We instantly think when reading this that Jesus is saying if someone is going to drag you to court, its best to settle before you get there. That is true. It is clear that there comes a point where our actions become so out of line we may very well find ourselves standing before the courts of Law. It takes just a couple minutes in front of the TV to see this happening.

I want to look at it on a deeper level, and I don't think I'm too far off here. Especially with what James tells us. Because we have received mercy instead of justice from our Creator, we need to extend it to others. If we don't extend it to those who ask for it, we squash the woolly bear. We devalue the image bearer whom the Creator values more than my right to remain angry and unforgiving. The restored people of God, living in New Creation have no right to hold grudges and withhold mercy. The whole point that Jesus is making here is that we commit murder in the truest sense of God's law when we act towards others in a way that does not reflect HIS mercy.

One of the saddest things here is that in acting unjustly toward others and unmerciful, we actually harm ourselves. Our growth in Christ can only go as far as we let it or as far as our forgiveness goes. Cain's decision not to listen to God not only cost Abel his life, it cost him his

own before God. So Takeaway number two this week: As you forgive, so you are forgiven. If we have walked through that door and into God's mercy, our job is to share the blessing. So:

3-What are we to do with Mercy when it is given to us?

Don't squash the Woolly Bear! This entire section of the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus taking the commands of the Law and showing us how they provide a clear roadmap. It is the way of being a fully restored and genuine human being. He digs down deep into our spirit and demands a radical new way of doing life. Life as it was intended to be from the beginning, but has gone its own way since the fall. This isn't about Jesus fulfilling the Law, putting it aside and then giving us new rules of conduct. We were and are created in his image and from the very beginning we are supposed to live lives that are fruitful and bring glory to God. One of the most important ways we do that is to love each other. Moses wrote this:

Genesis 1:27

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.* [Gen. 1.27 NRSV]

John in his first letter to the Church said:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. [1 John 3.1a NRSV]

Woolly bear Caterpillars can only become tiger moths if they survive the caterpillar stage. The mass carnage on Interstate 89 that occurs or squashing everyone you find in the wood pile because you don't like them stops the potential moth from ever being. On a very practical level, we have to have changed hearts. Jesus said out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. He addressed anger and insults as those things which wound, hurt and divide in such a way that the Law defines it as murder. It was never intended to be that way. In the beginning before the fall Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony in the garden. A miracle in itself. But God's plan since the fall has been to restore his people.

I close with two things; First, as Pastor and I talked about the message this week he made an interesting comment that struck me. I'm not even sure he noticed. We were talking about these caterpillars and how he finds them throughout his wood pile. He went on to explain how he

gently picks them up and moves them to a safe place so they won't get squashed. What a picture of a tender heart. A helpless creature being helped because they have value. There is a deep lesson for us all in that when we look at each other. Every human being is in a different stage, struggling with different things and issues. Sometimes that person who rubs you the wrong way, may very well be reflecting back to you the things you are struggling with. Instead of getting angry and squashing that wooly bear, perhaps you can pick them up in a way that magnifies our creator and validates the image bearer. Helping them somehow to move a few steps forward on their journey. In doing that, you are helping yourself as well.

Could I have the worship team come down please.

St. Paul's challenges those who have been raised with Christ in his letter to the Church in Colossae to be different. As God's Holy Word, it is for us today also. Since I believe he said it better than anyone could this is our takeaway number three:

Colossians 3.8-15. Meditate on it this week. Pray through it and ask God to help you in the areas you most struggle with. Get it into your spirit and into your hearts. He says:

But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

[Colossians 3.8-15 NRSV]

Have the prayer team come down

Prayer / Altar call