

“One Day At A Time”  
Matthew 5:33-37  
Makemie Presbyterian Church  
March 14, 2010

Matthew 5: 33 – 37 (Jesus is speaking)

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

This ends the reading.

A little story to get us started.

A pastor seated himself at a coffee shop counter next to a man who immediately noticed his clerical apparel. "Where is your Church?" the man asked.

The pastor pointed in the direction of his church on the corner & the man said, "Why that's the Church I go to."

"I've been pastor there for five years & I don't believe I've ever seen you," said the minister.

To which the man replied, "I didn't say I was a fanatic!"

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus is calling us to fanaticism in the matter of speaking clearly, as a portion of his radical sermon on the Mount. And Jesus continues to evoke harsh criticism from the religious leaders.

"If it's true that this Jesus speaks for God, as he claims, he wouldn't act this way," they reason.

"For this man receives sinners. This man sits down at table & eats with sinners. Instead of scorning them, Jesus comforts them. Instead of rejecting them with a show of righteous indignation, Jesus welcomes them. And all this yes be yes & no be no. Well I never."

You all know we live only one day at a time. But it is good to have something to look forward to. I've learned over the last nine years that when you are calling in the homes of people who are shut-in, or when you're calling in the nursing home or retirement center, not to just show up, but to call ahead. Make an appointment like I would with anyone else. To call on Tuesday and say, "Would it be all right if I came by on Friday afternoon about 3 p.m.?" And then you see the person whose life, which is rather confined & limited can look forward from Tuesday to Friday to your visit; and it multiplies the value of your visit. Sometimes the anticipation of your visit may be more pleasant than the visit itself.

But it's not only good to look forward to something. It's good also to remember. To have in the memory banks good things; Even if your memory twists & leaks. It's still good.

I remember right now leading a vacation bible school in a small rural church in west Alabama. I suppose ahh, thirty years ago, maybe longer. I was just a girl Sunday school teacher, single, didn't know what I was doing. But I was leading this vacation Bible school in this little church out in the country. And the lessons for Bible school that summer were about God's creation. About what God had created

and what we think about it, and all that. And I had a group it was a pretty rowdy bunch. And I was not enjoying too much this study of leaves & rocks & flowers & trees, and things like that, I wanted to get into something else, but that was the material & that's what we were doing. So one day I gathered them together & I said, "now I want you to go out into the fields & the woods around this church & find something that reminds you of God & when I ring the bell again I want you to come back tell me what you found & what it tells you about God."

So I rang the bell & they scattered. Now my plan was not to ring the bell a second time, because I was getting a little weary with these wild kids, but I chickened out & I rang the bell a second time. Here they came. I said, "What do you have?"

"I have a rock."

"Well what does that tell you about God?"

"God is stout."

"Well that's good."

"Well what do you have?"

"I have some blackberries."

"Well what does that tell you about God?"

“God is good, God feeds the birds & the animals & the people.”

“Hey, that’s good.”

“And what do you have?”

“I have a flower.”

“And what does that tell you about God?”

“God is pretty. God is beautiful.”

“Hey, that’s good.”

There was one boy in the class, Frankie. He was wild & a problem for the class, a disturbance. You know the type. He was there standing off to one side. “Well, Frankie, what did you bring?” And he was standing there holding the hand of his little sister who was in the kindergarten. And I said, “What did you bring?”

And he said, “my sister.”

“Well, what does that tell you about God?”

He said, “ah, ah, ahh, uhh, I don’t know.”

Now why did he do that? Wasn’t that a wonderful thing? Here is this boy, mean as a snake, really. Brings his sister. He can’t put it into words why, but somehow, I think he knew. Of all the things you can find around here to tell you about God, there’s nothing quite like my sister. Not a leaf, not a pinecone, not a flower, not a stone. My sister.

And I was taught something there that I hope will I never forget. A very valuable lesson. One that I keep teaching; that we are God's masterpiece. The best thing that God could create. Scarred sure. Damaged sure. Mistaken sure. In difficulty sometimes, sure. But it's still true. Because we've been restored & repaired. God took two timbers set them together up on a hill & opened the repair shop. "I specialize" says God, "in broken homes, in broken relationships, broken marriages, broken lives.

Well today, I want to talk to you about the value of a person's life. Now I'm sure you're already ahead of me, because you know as well as I do, that the value of a person's life is never based on some of the things we think are so important. Like education. Education's important. But that's not what gives a person value. I recall when I was working my way through college. I had a summer job at a textile mill. Holding threads, keeping them straight as they came out of these huge spinners. I worked beside a woman, who did the same work. Put in the same hours. Did the same work. At the end of the first week we got our checks. She was proud of hers. I was proud of mine. We looked at each other checks. Her check was fifteen dollars less than mine. I said, "ah, clerical mistake. One of the woman in the

office, hit the wrong key, clerical error, let's go get this straightened out." And naively we went up to the office and said, "These checks aren't the same. And we worked the same. I think she's been shorted here." Well there was some growling around, going into the back room and then they came out with a new check for her that was the same as mine. And then our boss, pulled me aside, and said to me, "We didn't know she could read." Mmmm. You mean they treated people on the basis of their education? She couldn't read therefore she was to be mistreated? The value of a person is not that.

It's not based on your physical condition. If you're attractive or not attractive. Healthy or not healthy. That's not it. I learned it again as a student when I began visiting one nursing home. Some of the folk in there had become throw-aways to their families, I guess. I went there for six months, every Tuesday afternoon. Some of the people in there had strokes, hip-replacements, other kinds of major difficulties, trying to learn to walk again, trying to learn feed themselves again. Some had visitors, everyday, some of them -- no visitors at all. And yet they told me about their children and about their grandchildren. There was a man in there, same time I was visiting, who was told, by one of the attendants, "Your daughter's downstairs visiting a friend.

I'm sure she'll be up here in a few minutes." Oh, he was excited. She never came. Her own dad. A throw away. A sick old man, had a stroke, drooled a little in the corners of his mouth. Throw him away.

Can I pause here just a moment? If you think just now, if you think of someone in your family or in your church, out of sight, out of mind, drop in and see them. Take a little time. Go over. Go see them. The value of a person's life is not predicate on their physical condition.

Nor is it based on the financial condition of the person. One can be as poor as Job's turkey or as rich as Croesus. That does not add to nor take away from a person's value. I recall when I was a mission educator for migrant families in rural Florida, going out as a young woman, calling in the camps, bouncing down dusty roads, going into tattered trailers, small cement block buildings. Making myself known, introducing myself, inviting people to the mission. Just having an enjoyable afternoon. And there was this one little beat-up trailer, big potholes around it filled with water; I went up the pathway to it. The front door had no lock on it, but I knocked. Finally this older woman came to the door, she seemed really old, she had no teeth, her hair was thin & pulled back into what would have been a bun, but not

enough hair. She had on an apron & you could tell by the bulge in the apron pocket that there was a snuff box in her apron pocket. But you didn't have to look in her apron; you could look at her mouth. There was snuff on her chin & around the corners of her mouth. She was an unattractive person. She said, "*Come in.*" I went in. She was very pleasant. "Won't you have a seat.?" *Sientesay*. Well there were two chairs she took one. I didn't want to sit down. It just looked so dirty. The floor was all buckled and cracked. There was a bright green lizard with a red dewlap playing around over a rough table; I guess it was her dining room table. And there was a little speckled dog with pups up in the middle of the bed. One room trailer. I didn't want to sit down. I could just see germs crawling everywhere. I made my visit brief. I just stood there near the doorway. A little nervous & awkward, wanting to get away. Heard a car pull up out at the edge of the road where I had parked. And up the pathway, a nice looking couple with a child, coming up the path. She was about three, this little girl. Had on one of those skirts with an edge of lace, that matched the top of her socks. Those little chubby legs, running up the path, running up to the trailer. Burst into the trailer & jumps into the lap of this old woman and kisses her all over her face & says, "I love you grandma." Ummm.

There I stood, a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ -- wouldn't even sit down in the house. What was the matter with me? I looked around. I didn't look within. I didn't look at her. I made a judgment on the basis of the circumstance. Instead of thinking about who is this who lives here. My mistake. A terrible mistake. It is extremely important to think about the value of the other person all the time.

But I think a very good beginning point is to hold a proper view of ourselves. Just because you're treated as a dog, doesn't mean you have to start barking. And a good healthy attitude towards other people, I think begins or least it has as an important ingredient, a healthy regard for one's self. Now I know that you are, just as I am repulsed by the big ego. The swaggering & the strutting of the egotistical person. Nobody likes to be around anyone like that. But that doesn't mean that the rest of us, have to crawl off into a corner and say "Well I'm just nobody." And call it humility. That's not it!

You know sometimes churches make us feel that way about ourselves. We want to be humble. Of course we do. We don't want to be egotistical & proud & arrogant. Of course not. But in the process there is a loss of adequate self-esteem. And that is a mistake. There is no value in that.

Now listen to what Jesus said to his friends. We're in the Sermon on the Mount now, don't forget. Matthew 5, you heard Krista read this a moment ago. It begins at verse 33.

"Again you have heard it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Don't swear at all, either by heaven, for it's the throne of God, or by the earth for it's his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, you can't make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Now you may think that that is a rather strange passage to be reading in connection with this subject. But think about it for a moment. Now Jesus is not talking about profanity, he is talking about swearing. Profanity is another subject. Just a lot of potty-mouth talk, that's another subject.

He's not talking about cursing. Cursing is to pronounce God's disfavor on somebody else. Really only God can curse, but we're kind of arrogant & so we try to curse somebody. But that's another subject.

What Jesus is talking about is swearing. Now what is swearing? Swearing is calling in something greater than yourself to support your

word. Why would you want to call in something else? Heaven or earth, or this or that, to support your word. On my mother's grave I'm telling the truth, as God is my witness I'm telling the truth, by heaven I'm telling you the truth, by the stars of heaven I'm, by the temple of heaven I'm telling... Why would anybody talk that way? Cross my heart hope to die, I'm telling you the truth. Why talk that way?

Anybody who talks that way operates on the assumption that he or she is a liar. And that you recognize that I'm a liar & therefore I have to immediately begin to support my word.

"I'll pay you next Saturday. Honest I will, I really will on my mother's grave. My hand on a stack of Bible's, I will."

What does that assume? It assumes that by saying I will pay you Saturday, I'm not telling the truth. So I put all this scaffolding around it, called swearing.

Just let your Yes be Yes let your No be No. That's all you need. Why? Because you ought to accept yourself as a center of value, decision, power. I am somebody & my word is my bond. My word is of value ask anybody in this county. If he says it, if she says it, if she promises it, if he promises it. If they shake hands on it, it is that way. The most valuable thing in the world. But the only way it can be

established that your Yes is yes & your no is no is to be a person of character. And to be a person of character is to respect one's self & regard one's self in that way. To move among our friends, to move around at work & within our families with a low opinion of one's self almost invariable ends up having a low opinion of other people because if I'm short I want to cut the others down.

But to be human is to be God's masterpiece.

And sometimes you know we have to be reminded because it's so popular to run one's self down.

We have to be reminded of who we are & what our value is.

In an old hotel in a small town in west Texas a young woman has the job of cleaning the hotel. There are not many customers any more you know how it is in old hotels, in downtowns, small towns. She does it all by herself. She has no family there. Part of her pay she gets a room up almost in the attic of the old place. She comes down every morning with a bucket & a mop. In an old dress, old shoes, begins to scrub. The beautiful entry & lobby to the old hotel, marble floors, a nice chandelier, fine woodwork. She scrubs & cleans. She gets a ladder & polishes the chandelier. She gets down on her hands & knees & scrubs that floor. Goes up to the room every night.

Mop, bucket, old dress. Goes to bed, gets up, puts the same thing on. Gets the same bucket, comes down. Why not? When she's down there in the lobby sometimes the boss will yell at her, "Hurry up. Got to clean up room 33. Hurry up, get to those light fixtures. Hurry up, & clean this desk over here."

Fussing & yelling at her. Some times when she's down on her hands & knees cleaning the floor, of the old hotel, the front door is open & some of the boys driving by in their pick-up trucks will honk the horn & yell something ugly to her. She goes up at night with a mop, bucket, old dress.

One day she is there in the lobby. And a man walks in, nice-looking. She's never seen him before. And she says, "pardon me."

He says to her, "uh pardon me, lady, but I'm a stranger here & I'm looking for a man named Harmon. Charles Harmon. I have 420 East Oak as the address. Do you know a Charles Harmon?" And she just stares at him. And he says, "I hate to interrupt your work. My this place is shining. I know your boss is proud of your work. Do you do this all by yourself? 420 East Oak, could you direct me to 420 E Oak? And she just stands there with her mouth open. And he says, "my that chandelier, crystal isn't it? You did that? If I have to spend the night I

think I'll stay here. This is marvelous. I know everybody is proud of your work. 420 East Oak."

She just looks at him. She can't believe that he is talking to her this way. He says, "I'm sorry to interrupt you I know your busy, I want to tell you that I think this is very attractive work, I know you're proud of it. Well I'll find someone else. Thank you, I'm sorry to bother you."

She goes about her work & goes up to the room that evening with her mop & bucket & the old dress. She goes over to a little mirror that she has fastened to the wall & looks at herself. Pulls the rag off her hair, shakes her long hair down over her shoulders & she says, "I've got to do this hair tonight."

Goes over to a little cardboard closet & says, "I need to change dresses. I think I'll wear this yellow one."

And she opens a cigar box & pulls out a little vial of perfume. And says, "Ah, this will do, I think I'll use this, tomorrow."

What's happened to her? What's happened to her? The same thing that's happened to you & to me. Somebody reminded us of who we are & who's image we're created & by whom we have been recreated in the forgiveness of sin. Don't forget that. Amen? Amen.