

Fulfillment

Matthew 5:13-20

February 9, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

Once upon a time, we had crying babies at our house. One baby was pretty easily and quickly soothed. A bottle, or a snuggle, or a burp was all that was needed. And then there was the other baby. She could get worked up in an instant, zero to sixty with no warning whatsoever. Sweet and smiley deteriorated into red-faced screaming. As little time as it took her to go from happy to unhappy, you might think that it would be equally quick to get her to calm down. But no. That's not how babies work, at least not this particular baby.

The most frequent solution to this crying baby was to feed her. That worked quickly, if hungry was the problem. If hungry was not the problem, well, then, we had to try something else. One of her parents would somewhat frantically try all kinds of solutions in rapid fire succession, one after the other. Toy? No. Still screaming. Burp? No. Still screaming. Lay her down by herself? Oh definitely not. Diaper? No. Still screaming. Too hot? No. Too cold? No. Rocking chair? No.

Not to point fingers at this parent, but the problem was not the solutions this parent was offering, but the frantic pace at which they were offered. What this particular baby needed was time to calm down. Like a lot of time. More than seemed reasonable. What almost always worked with this baby was taking her outside and walking. Pacing was good. Sitting down or standing still was bad. And it still took her a long time to calm down. I remember, more than once, walking her up and down our driveway in Gonzales at 2 a.m. That's when I learned that deer traveled up our street in the wee hours of the morning. I remember, her first Thanksgiving, after she had refused to take a nap and had played with the bigger cousins all day, she would not—could not—stop screaming. I wrapped her up in a blanket, put on my coat, and walked her all the way down my grandmother's street. I probably walked at least a mile before she stopped screaming. Then I had to turn around and walk back. Complete strangers stopped to ask me if we were ok. That's how loud she was crying.

What worked for this baby was not trying a bunch of different things to soothe her. What worked for this baby was inhuman amounts of patience, doing the same thing over and over again, until she could calm down. She didn't need

distractions or more stimulation, she needed to be soothed by repetition and boredom. And someone walking her, preferably outside, forever and ever.

I have now painted myself into an unfortunate corner, in which the patient parent—who by this time you have probably figure out which one of us it was—is God, and the screaming baby is us. I don't like to put myself in the place of God, but here I am in this corner, and it's the best way I can think of to get where I'm going. I promise not to do it very often. Just hang on to the image of a patient parent, who can remain nameless and genderless, for the purposes of the sermon this morning, a patient parent who simply tries the same thing over and over again until it finally breaks through and works.

This is what God did with the law. Tried it over and over again until it finally broke through and worked. The law had various incarnations, so to speak, but it was the primary expression of the covenant between God and the people, the expression that the people managed to return to again and again.

The law started out pretty simple. God said to Abraham, *Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*' (Genesis 12:1-3). That's how it begins, the covenant. Abraham has to follow. That's all that's expected of him.

After the Exodus, after God delivers the people from Egypt, things get more complicated. God gives the ten commandments to Moses, and they become the nucleus of the law. Throughout Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, the commandments get elaborated and explained and detailed out. For example, the commandment to remember the sabbath and keep it holy. Well, that seems easy enough, but it turns out that they needed some more explanation, on what counts as work and what counts as rest. The commandments that seemed simple enough turned out to be difficult to follow.

The law was, and is, a gift of grace. Our particular branch of Christianity has stressed this purpose of the law. We agree with other branches that the law shows us that we are sinful, and constrains us from doing wrong. But the primary function of the law, according to Calvin and our ancestors as Presbyterians, is to show us how to live a life of gratitude, in thanksgiving for God's gifts to us. The law is an instruction in grace.

The law appears in the first five books of the Bible. The rest of the Old Testament is essentially about the people failing to keep the law. And failure to

keep the law does not mean that they were extra bad people, or extra sinful, or less faithful people. It means they didn't live lives of gratitude for the grace that God had given them. So they would fail to keep the law in ways small and large. The judges or prophets or sometimes both would call them to repent. They eventually would, there would be some sort of renewal of the covenant, and more promises to keep the law, to live lives of gratitude. And then the whole thing would repeat again.

Can you see the patient parent here? The God who tries the same thing, over and over, so that the people can calm down and receive the gift of grace that God has given them. God says, people, you're mine. You can't not be mine. Here's how to live. And the people say, oh, ok. Thanks. And it works for a little while, but then something happens to upset them, sometimes it's a mystery, just like what upsets a baby, and they get out of control and can't calm themselves back down to live in the grace. And God picks them up and walks up and down the street, makes circles around the block, maybe sings to them a little bit, forgives them, gives them the law again, so they can live lives of gratitude. Over and over and over and over. God's patience is truly not human. It's divine.

So when Jesus says this in Matthew, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. <sup>18</sup>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."* When Jesus says this, he's upholding this same patience of God, this through-line of grace and gratitude. Jesus has just laid out the Beatitudes, the "blessed are..." statements that Jacob read last week. Jesus has just told them that they are salt and light. There's no reason to think that's he's going to abolish the law; he is a gift of grace, just as the law has been a gift of grace. The God who made the original promises to the people of Israel, the God of grace, is the same God we know in Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives the law another explanation, another way to understand how we can live in gratitude for the very same grace that God had been showing to people for generation after generation, the very same grace that the law had described, the very same grace that the prophets had tried to remind the people about, the very same grace that is then made most real, that is then fulfilled, in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is what he means when he says he has come to fulfill the law. Jesus will show, has shown, what it means to live a life in obedience to the Law, in gratitude for God's grace. Only Jesus can live that life perfectly and so fulfill the law.

But Jesus is equally clear that we aren't let off the hook. He tells us to be as righteous as the scribes and the Pharisees, who we usually think of as corrupt religious authorities. But they were generally known as righteous people who knew the law better than most and followed it to the best of their abilities and efforts.

There's no way for us to know the attitude of those who followed the law to the best of their abilities, scribes and Pharisees and other folks too. As we talked about last week, it was easy and somewhat preferable to view the law as a task list to check off. But the prophets, and Jesus, and our own tradition, call us to a deeper understanding of the law. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. That's a deeper understanding and summary of the law. Jesus's Beatitudes are also a deeper understanding of the law. You're the salt of the earth and the light of the world are another way of understanding the law.

Jesus came not to get rid of the law, but to fulfill it, to help us fulfill it, to show us how to fulfill it, to give us again the grace that God has given us time and again, so that we can live in full gratitude and testimony to that grace.