

The Extensions

Matthew 5:17-48

October 18, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

Maybe you've been on a diet sometime. Or maybe just trying to eat healthier. Or maybe your doctor has decided you need to eat healthier. Or maybe you've tried giving up a particular food for Lent. Let's say, just for the sake of illustration, that you've decided that you need to stop eating sweets. Seems like a worthy goal. And so you simply set a rule that you won't eat any of the sweets that you have in your house. No brownies that are sitting on the counter. None of the candy bars that are in the dish on the coffee table. You easily walk by without looking at the Oreos that are in the pantry. Right? You simply make a rule that you're not going to eat sweets, and that's all it takes. Yes? No?

Not hardly. Unless you have amazing amounts of willpower, then that's not all it takes. Most of us, probably all of us, if we really intended to give up sweets and stop eating sweets, would need to take an additional step. The brownies would need to get out of the house, and someone should stop making brownies altogether. The candy dish on the coffee table would need to get emptied and the dish put away out of sight. And the Oreos in the pantry would probably have to get thrown in the trash. We'd have to make it easier to follow our new rule by making it more difficult to break it. We're making a whole new rule: no sweets in the house, in order to follow the first new rule: no eating sweets.

Amy-Jill Levine, in the Sermon on the Mount book we're using for Bible Study, says that the rabbis call this process "building a fence around the law." The original law, in this case, is no eating sweets. But in order to protect that law and make it so that we don't violate that law, we build a fence around that law, and the fence is a new law: no sweets in the house. You see how that works? The new, more restrictive law, is made in order to help us keep the original law.

So when Jesus says *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 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."* (Matthew 5:17-18), when Jesus says he's not coming to abolish the law but fulfill it, and then when he gives example after example of what he means by that, this is what he's doing. He's making it easier to fulfill the law by making a new law to protect the original. Or not really to protect the law, but to make it harder for us to violate the original law. He doesn't want us to even get close to it.

For example, and this is the law Jesus uses first as an example: do not murder. Seems pretty easy for most of us to avoid murdering people. But Jesus extends that law, builds a fence, makes another law so that we'll be sure to keep the law of not murdering. He says don't be angry or insult someone. Anger and insulting are the step before treating someone as if they aren't worthy of value, which is the next step before deciding that that someone is less human than we are, which is the next step before deciding their life doesn't have any value, which is the next step before deciding that murder is justifiable.

So on the one hand, Jesus is making a new law that's harder for us to follow. It's just about impossible not to ever be angry with someone, or ever insult someone. But working to

follow that law guards us from sliding into behavior that dehumanizes our neighbors and could eventually lead us to violating the prohibition against murder.

That's just one example. Jesus has lots of others, each of which is probably worth a sermon by itself. He uses the same structure and same process of extending the law to its logical conclusion. Nothing is off limits for Jesus, seems like. He extends the laws regarding adultery, divorce, swearing oaths, retaliation, and how far exactly we're supposed to go in loving others. It's far.

It seems to me that Jesus has a two fold purpose in doing these extensions, or fence building. First, he's doing what the rabbis describe, protecting us from violating the big laws by making it harder for us to even get close to breaking them. But he's also showing us what life in the kingdom is. Just like the Beatitudes last week in this sense, Jesus is laying out instructions for how to live in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Imagine what it would be like, how it would feel, to live in the kingdom of heaven, where people are able to refrain from anger and insults. What a difference that would make—we can see that on a daily basis. What would it be like to live in a time and place where people did not treat others like possessions, where they valued trust and commitment and faithfulness. How different would it be to live in a world where people had no need to turn away from each other. What would it be like to live in a place where we could trust one another and no one had to swear to anything, because we knew our neighbors would keep their promises. And what would it be like to love our enemies, to see our enemies as children of God, as people valuable and worthy of honor.

Some days that seems so distant and far away as to be ridiculous castles in the sky. But I have to believe that it's real, somehow, somewhere, someday. Jesus was protecting the people from their worst selves and worst impulses and at the same time was giving them something to aspire for and hope toward. He's doing the same for us. Let's work on it, every day, even as we hope for the fullness of the kingdom.