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Paul Purdue preaching

Did you know there are no physical descriptions of Jesus in the Bible? So if you were to draw a picture of Jesus, would you draw your Jesus teaching by the sea, healing the sick, flipping over tables or sitting at your kitchen table? Would you add a halo? How do you picture Jesus?

The Jesus I grew up with came with a halo. We learned that “*Jesus was truly God and truly human*”, but the sermons and lessons focused on Jesus as “*the Son God*” perfect in every way. We never considered what it means for Jesus to “*be truly human*”. If we read the Bible we will see Jesus navigated sadness, anger, disappointment, weariness, joys and grief. Matthew’s 15th chapter makes more sense if we understand that Jesus felt the same human things we do.

Matthew wants us to know “*The Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem*”. Why does that matter? Well these scholars and Pharisees are not the local Pharisees the disciples went to synagogue with, barbecued with, and built community with. These Pharisees have come from the Jerusalem office to rural Galilee to evaluate the Jesus movement: “*Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.*” None of us like when visitors immediately demand “*Why do you people do that!*”.

Now our pediatricians, epidemiologists and parents tell us that washing our hands before eating is the right thing to do. So why does Jesus snap back, “*why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?*” Instead of answering the question, Jesus goes on the offensive. Jesus deconstructs how these religious experts systematically break one of the Ten Commandments using some crafty legal maneuvers buried and pious language to avoid God’s call to care for aging parents. Fired up Jesus slings Scripture at them: “*You people honor God with your lips, but your hearts are far from the Lord, Your worship is vain*” (Isaiah 29) Ouch.

I wish Jesus had shown a little more patience. Labels like “*Blind guides*” rarely change hearts or minds. Indeed, Jesus’ disciples are shocked and tell Jesus “*Do you not know you offended our allies the Pharisees?*”

What do we do with Jesus’ passion in this passage? We can judge it or justify it, but what if anger or grief is not sinful or righteous, but part of the image of God within us? What if we can “*be angry and not sin!*” (Ephesians 4:26) What if our grief is not a sign of failure but of our “being truly human”. What if clumsily sticking up for good-hearted

people doing their best is holy, beautiful, excellent, and good? What If God loves us enough to get angry when we mistreat other children of God? (Mark 3)

Still, If Jesus had taken a minute, perhaps our Lord might have calmly responded, “Can you Bible experts not see the good things we are doing here? The sick are being made whole, the poor are hearing good news, the hungry are being fed, strangers are finding community. (Matt 14) How can you witness 5000 people eating a free meal and focus on some fisherman forgetting to wash their hands? A critical or cynical spirit slowly steals our joy and erodes our capacity for compassion. (Luke 6:32-36)

I am glad that Jesus stood with those feeding 5000 people instead of the haters on social media. It is liberating to know Jesus got fired up and maybe slightly dysregulated defending people trying imperfectly to bring healing into the world. Maybe if along with Jesus’ divinity we understood that Jesus was truly human, we might stop shaming ourselves and others when anger, grief, or frustration pushes off center for a few moments?

I am not sure why Jesus never answers his critics' questions or why Peter needed to recenter Jesus saying “*Explain this parable to us.*”? Eventually, Jesus teaches, “*It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles, indeed whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer, But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.*”

Mark as an editor radically expands Jesus' teaching “*thereby Jesus declared all food clean*” (Mark 7) Mark as editor sets aside over 80 Bible verses mandating a Kosher diet (Leviticus 11 & Deuteronomy 23) Friends, Mark is engaging in progressive interpretation and theology.

I originally titled this sermon “*break some rules*” but Amy, our amazing children’s director, raised some excellent questions about my cutesy title. I quickly scrapped “breaking rules”. Rule-breaking is not part of Jesus’ core moral philosophy. Breaking rules sometimes is a moral responsibility, but most rules are for our benefit.

We need to wash our hands before eating, but if we forget, we may fall ill, but not washing our hands does not make us sinful. God commands us to keep the Sabbath. Jesus tells us God created the sabbath for our good. (Mark 2 & Matthew 12) Practising Sabbath meets core human needs: stopping of work, mindfulness

through worship and prayer, gathering together, open equal seating, singing in harmony, passing the peace, hearing we are beloved and forgiven, and striving to make earth a little more like heaven. We need each other. We need sabbath. Sabbath keeping is good for us.

In Matthew 5 Jesus tells us, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil them."* Then Jesus proceeds to call us to live into a deeper, more just, uplifting, and loving understanding of the law saying *"You have heard it said from ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' but I say to you do not stay angry... You have heard taught, 'You shall not commit adultery, but I say do not objectify people. ... You (Men only) have been taught that you can divorce your wife with just a note (and she has no recourse), but I say God expects more... . 'You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,'" Jesus calls into the deep end of the moral law, the law of love, the way of compassion, justice, peace and equity.*

The law of love sometimes demands that we break unjust laws. Moses' massive civil disobedience and liberation movement began with the resistance of two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Not only did Shiphrah and Puah refuse to carry out Pharaoh's immoral law, they bore false witness to Pharaoh under oath in order to preserve life. God blessed them for breaking an immoral law. (Exodus 1)

In 1963 Rev Dr Martin Luther King JR was in Birmingham resisting evil, injustice and oppression. Locked up in jail, Dr King wrote to his critics a group of white pastors *"You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all." ... How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.... Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is*

not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful.”

In Matthew 23, Jesus passionately calls out the legalists, who carefully kept the law, even tithing the herbs in their kitchen window boxes, while neglecting the weightier matters of the law, *“justice, mercy and faithfulness”*. (Matthew 23) The heart of the law is justice, mercy, faithfulness. Jesus calls us to uphold the law of compassion: love for neighbors, welcome for strangers, food for the hungry, healthcare for the sick, equity for all, forgiveness for enemies, and the chance for redemption. Jesus put it like this “do unto others as you would have them do unto you!”

We need rules, we need sabbath, we need truth-telling, we need to love difficult people. Rules help us remember what matters and what we should do. However, I am glad that Jesus got fired up when people focussed on judging others more than on doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God. (Micah 6:8) That feels like good news to me. So let us keep the moral law; the law of love, the law of mercy, faithfulness, compassion, equity, peace and justice. Amen