

ENDORSED

Matthew 7:1-14

EPIPHANY 6

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There are several movie scenes that can reduce me to tears.

Here's one of them.

An old man walks down a wide path through a colonnade of evergreens.

He has a full head of gray hair.

His eyebrows spike with a grandfatherly flourish toward his temples.

His gait is quick, but swift.

Nevertheless, he marches forward with great intent and purpose, as if he is late for an important occasion.

Behind him trail his family— his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren.

Before him lies a vast green lawn, striped with thousands of white crosses and studded with a random Star of David that extends toward the horizon.

The old man's pace picks up as he makes his way to his destination, a cross bearing the inscription:

Capt. John W. Miller, June 13, 1944.

Upon arriving, his eyes now glowing red around their edges and collecting tears from their ducts, he sniffs and grabs his handkerchief.

His knees then give way as he sinks to kneel before the cross.

Behind him stands his family.

Now, looking reverently at the resting place of the man who sacrificed his life to save him, the old man asks his wife, **"Tell me I've led a good life."**

The request flusters her and takes her almost by surprise, but his earnest request makes her think better of brushing it off.

With great dignity, she responds, **"You have."**

Then James Ryan stands erect at attention and salutes his savior.

Who of us can see this scene from Steven Spielberg's magnificent film, ***Saving Private Ryan*** and not ask ourselves the question "Have I lived a good life?"

Is our life worthy the sacrifice of others or of Jesus?

Does our life have a purpose, and have we lived up to it?

These questions usually come to us at the hardest times, like during a threatening illness, or at the death of a loved one.

What distinguishes us humans from all other creatures is our sense of the awareness of our finitude, our death.

Because of that, we keep asking ourselves from time to time questions about why life is the way it is, what it all means, and have we truly regarded it as a gift from God to be lived for others?

This morning, we take up the Narrative Lectionary's last reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

As a reminder, in Matthew's Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount immediately follows the summary of Jesus' message:

"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives His listeners a deeper understanding of the kind of life God's Kingdom offers.

Jesus, Himself, becomes the evidence of and the availability for the presence of God's already arriving Kingdom.

Jesus was not just acting for God, but also WITH God.

When we receive God's gift of life by relying on Christ, we find that God comes to act with us as we rely on Him in our actions.

C. S. Lewis writes in his book, **MERE CHRISTIANITY**, that our faith is not a matter of our hearing what Christ said long ago and **"trying to carry it out."**

Rather,

"The real Son of God is at your side.

He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself.

He is beginning, so to speak, to 'inject' His kind of life and thought, His life into you, beginning to turn the tin soldier into a live man.

The part of you that does not like it is the part that is still tin." (p.148).

Jesus' words and presence gave many of His listeners faith to see that when He acted, God also acted.

The governance, or 'rule' of God came into play and was at hand.

It was to still uncomprehending ears that Jesus said,

“Those who have seen me have seen the Father.”

In the past two weeks, we have heard Jesus introduce His Sermon on the Mount with His Beatitudes, or blessings that God's Kingdom bestows.

Last week, we overheard Jesus as He was teaching the spiritual practices of the Kingdom, in terms of fasting, praying, and alms-giving.

Following a section on the place of possessions in our lives, Jesus turns our attention to our relationships with God and with others, both inside and outside of our faith community.

Today, we hear Jesus continuing His theme of better righteousness in our relationships.

He speaks to the prohibition against judging others, the need for discernment, the place of prayer request and how God answers, and concludes with what we have come to know as “The Golden Rule.”

What we have before us is a series of admonitions, or words of wisdom as to how to relate as members of the Kingdom of God.

To put it more succinctly, wisdom is living life in God's Kingdom on the basis of God's rules.

The Sermon on the Mount is a practical guide for applying God's wisdom to living, not only a good life, but also a spiritually mature life as Jesus, Himself, lives and demonstrates it.

In the years I worked as a pastoral counselor before becoming your pastor here at Grace, I sought out many pearls of wisdom from philosophers and therapists, in order to grow in my life as a husband, father, friend, and counselor.

Here's a sampling from those I have gathered along the way:

- Life is not a race, but a marathon.
- It's time to grow up and let go.
- Seek to make amends.

- Recover personal authority.
- Vow to get unstuck.
- Choose the road less traveled.
- Be the person you want your children to become.
- Learn to love real people, not imagined ones.
- Choose meaning over happiness.
- Exorcize the Ghosts of the Past that bind you.
- Free your children from you.
- Honor the difference between job, duty, and calling.
- Construct a mature spirituality.
- Live an examined life.

Many people would rather reduce this list into a rule like the one that concludes today's Narrative Lectionary lesson:

“so everything you would like people to do to you, also do these things to them” (7:12).

The Golden Rule, as this verse is popularly known, is widely cited, as well as abused.

A parental twist on the Golden Rule I used to tell our children was,

“Whoever has the gold, rules.”

Of course, a child's version puts it like this:

“Do unto others before they do it to you!”

A proper understanding of the Golden Rule begins with its context.

Our reading, from the opening section of Matthew, Chapter Seven, lists various obligations of a disciple.

With our brothers and sisters of the faith, we should offer help, not judgment.

With God, we pray with confidence, knowing God will care and provide for us.

However, these same verses sum up Jesus' teaching.

After hearing His teaching discourse on discipleship, Jesus says to apply it to yourself and not to others.

Take the log out of your own eye, instead of poking around in other people's eyes.

If we should forget our responsibilities to our neighbors, we can remember this summary:

“Do to others what you would have them do to you.”

In my reading on John Calvin for our present Adult Forum on Great Theologians in the Christian Life, I came across this quote:

“ . . .the Golden Rule is another way of saying that we should be fair and just toward all.

So many quarrels occur because we knowingly and willingly trample justice toward others under our feet, while demanding perfect justice for ourselves.”

Sadly, we can so fix our attention on our own needs that we are hardly aware of the needs of others.

The whole Bible sets the standard for our responsibility for others.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us a summary of the Law and the Prophets.

To paraphrase slightly, Jesus says,

“Do for others what your sense of justice would require others to do for you.”

Later on in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus will simply say

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (22:39).

But who can maintain this standard?

Once again, Jesus’ laws lead us to see our sin and our need for grace.

We cannot keep this law.

We cannot stop judging others for their failings.

We cannot even keep the Golden Rule from being tarnished by our neglect.

Beloved people of God,
what then shall we do?

We must ask God for mercy and for the forgiveness of our sins.

The same Jesus who laid down these laws also gave His life for those who couldn’t keep them.

He will give us His Spirit, so that we might see our neighbor with more the eyes of Jesus, the eyes of love, and might serve that neighbor.

In so doing, we serve our Lord.

Because Jesus gave up His life for us, we, like a James Ryan, can salute our Savior.

Better yet, we can love and serve others in His name.

AMEN