

Rappahannock Christian Church – 2/13/11
Dr. Kenneth Wilbur

Communion Meditation

Ladies and gentlemen, I am beginning to feel old, and old fashioned!

I watched a documentary on PBS this week about the digitization of America. They had these college kids on there who had 3-4 electronic devices going at once, all the time! It got me to thinking about how in this day and age, there are MANY new ways for people to communicate and to be in "community."

I wonder if there will come a time when Christians will no longer see the need to meet together (person to person, face to face) each week. Could we somehow participate in a virtual Lord's Table, with a virtual loaf and cup? I guess I'm old fashioned enough to hope that this will never happen. I believe it's important for us to come together -- face to face -- as a Christian Church Family and remember the bond that keeps us together -- our bond in Jesus Christ and what He has done for us.

Let me read something even older for you. It is the words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 – For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Matters Of The Heart

This mornings Scripture reading comes from Matthew 5. This is part of the famous "Sermon on the Mount." Some of it can be hard to understand. Many of the so-called "hard sayings" of Jesus are found in the Sermon on the Mount. This is a small part of it:

Matthew 5:21-24 - "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

I feel like I used a little bit of trickery in titling this sermon, "Matters of the Heart." I suppose you'll think I'm going to talk about love and Valentine's Day. Well, I'm not!

I think that if I were a reporter for the Jerusalem Post who had been standing in the crowd listening to Jesus give this Sermon on the Mount, the headline for my article would be "Jesus Shocks, Angers Crowd." What He said was actually shocking. When He first said these things it really must have rocked the people. If you're angry with your brother,

if you have hate in your heart, you have committed murder? Can he really mean this? How can this be? Does Jesus expect these teachings and these principles to be literally put into practice? How could we ever enforce something like that? We don't know what people are thinking and feeling. And if we punished people for being angry or hateful, how many people would be left on earth? Not very many!

Like I said, there's a lot I don't understand. But I think that I DO understand the underlying principle Jesus is trying to teach, so we'll concentrate on that.

The Pharisees have been very, very strict about obedience to the Old Testament Law. They are extremely strict and careful about it. To their credit, let's acknowledge that part of the Pharisees' strictness is because they remember the disobedience of their forefathers. They remember the repeated punishment that their nation has suffered, and their mantra has become, "Never again! We'll obey every single law down to the last letter and the minutest detail so as to make sure we're okay with God."

The problem is that several generations of Pharisees have passed. They have had this legalistic mindset so long that they have lost sight of what the law was for. They have forgotten that it was supposed to be a way to get people close to God. Through the Law they were supposed to discover a spiritual connection with their Maker. But the Pharisees have become blind to this. Now they only care about obeying the "letter" of the Law. As far as they are concerned, the "spirit" of the Law is irrelevant!

What the Pharisees taught was that you could do whatever you wanted as long as you didn't technically violate a commandment. It was okay to be UNmerciful, UNforgiving and act superior to others. It was okay to look for loopholes in the Law that would enable you to lie, cheat and oppress people while still claiming to be Godly.

Jesus takes them to task for this. Our reading today is the first of six "antitheses" that He gives to illustrate his point. The word "antithesis" means contrast or opposite. Jesus says, "You have heard it said A....but I say to you, B!"

"You have heard it said, do not murder. But I say to you that if you harbor hate and anger toward someone in your heart you are guilty of murder!"

"You have heard it said, do not commit adultery. But I say to you that if you even look at a woman with lust in your heart you have committed adultery!"

This is radical! It is shocking!

Jesus is saying that hate is not okay. It is not okay to hate someone as long as you don't club the person over the head with a lead pipe and kill him. That is NOT the intent of the Mosaic Law. If you think that God doesn't care about what is in your heart, that He only cares about your lists of dos and don'ts, you are WRONG!

Jesus says this more than once. Once, for example, the Pharisees were giving Jesus' disciples a hard time because they didn't always ceremonially wash their hands when they ate. This isn't about washing your hands before dinner after you've been working on a diesel engine. This is a religious, ceremonial washing of the hands. But Jesus' response is to say, "Don't you know, it's not what goes into you that makes you impure or unclean. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"

The Pharisees' interest was in the letter of the law, and in the strictest kind of obedience to it. Jesus, on the other hand, claims that, in God's eyes, sin and righteousness have their origins in the heart.

Another example is the one in our Scripture Reading. If you go to give your offering at the temple and you remember that your brother has something against you, go straight to your brother and make things right between you, then come back with your offering.

Jesus is telling them that sin is *a matter of the heart*. They need to re-think their whole idea of sin. Sin is not just the breaking of a commandment. Sin is a matter of what is in your very heart and soul. Conversely, you are not "righteousness" in the eyes of God even if you have observed the Sabbath, said your prayers, avoided pork and kept Gentiles at arm's length. Righteousness is as much an attitude as it is action. Are you forgiving? Are you generous? Do you show kindness and hospitality -- yes, even to those "Gentile dogs?!" Do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, OR do you obey the letter of the Law but are still mean, hateful, proud, and unforgiving in your heart?

This, friends, is VERY different from the way the religious people of Jesus' day were thinking and doing! God, Jesus says, looks on the heart! What God wants of us is NOT lots of neat little check marks on our lists of dos and don'ts. What God wants is for us to WANT to please him and for us to WANT to love our neighbors. True righteousness comes from the heart and gets expressed in word and deed. This is what pleases God.

Benediction

"The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." – Numbers 6: 24-26