

**SERMON “The Radical Made Real”**  
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**Olivet Congregational Church, UCC**  
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**SCRIPTURE**

**Matthew 5: 21-48**

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup>Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. <sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup>But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or

black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

<sup>38</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

## **SERMON** The Radical Made Real

Do you remember memorizing the Ten Commandments as a child? I do. I also recall a Sunday school classroom where one of the walls had a painting of two tablets with the Commandments, written in words that kids could understand. As you may recall, the first four had to do with people's relationship with God and the next six had to do with people's relationship with each other. Our scripture today has to do with that relationship aspect of the Ten Commandments, how we relate to one another. In fact, relationship is what Hebrew Scriptures are referring to when they speak of righteousness. Righteousness is all about right relationship.

In this morning's scripture reading, Jesus is still preaching and teaching on that mountainside. He is continuing to surprise people. He is not exactly turning the first century ideas about who is blessed on their head in today's part of his

message. Rather, he is taking those Commandments that the Lord gave to Moses to another level – a deeper level, a more challenging level.

I can imagine his listeners scratching their heads, perhaps questioning his challenges.

Jesus goes beyond the letter of the law which prohibits murder, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ Jesus tells people that they will be judged for being angry with a brother or sister or insulting them or calling them a fool. He tells them they must reconcile- make peace with the one with whom they have an issue - before coming to synagogue to make their offering – “leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” He goes beyond the prohibition of adultery saying that a man who lusts after a woman commits adultery in his heart. He prohibits the divorcing of one’s wife, saying that both she and her future husband would be committing adultery if she marries again. Divorce puts the woman in a terrible position because if she is unable to get married, she could be left without means of support. You see, in the patriarchal society of first century Judaism, a man was allowed to divorce his wife. A woman could not file for divorce. The woman would be the one who suffered in divorce.

Then Jesus’ message becomes really radical. He says, ““You have heard that it was 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...” I can imagine people on that mountainside thinking, “Really Jesus, do you know what you are asking?”

Jesus does know what he is asking people to do. He knows that what he is asking is not easy, he even explains that “if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” Jesus acknowledges that loving those who love us is easy and loving those who hate us or persecute us, well, that’s another story.

Overall, Jesus is telling his disciples to remember that the love of God is for all people. So how we love our neighbor has a bearing on our love for our God, that as God’s children we are called to share God’s love. Jesus is telling those sitting on that mountainside, and us, that love is the proper response to even violence and hatred. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King put it this way, “Darkness cannot drive

out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Now, I can imagine some people in that crowd, Jews living under Roman occupation, turning to each other saying, ‘I don’t know about this. This loving my enemy, loving someone who hurts me, it’s just too much. I don’t know if I can do it, or if I want to.’ I would not be surprised if 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, if we are honest with ourselves, if we would not ask ourselves the question, “Can I love or would I even want to love my enemy? I’m not sure I’m ready for Jesus’ radical love.”

So when we hear examples of radical love, perhaps we can believe that Jesus’ words can be put into practice. They can make a difference. Perhaps those stories can give us hope. I have three to share.

The first happened in Meriden, CT. It was November 2015, following shootings in Paris. There was a shooting at a Meriden Mosque. A man named Ted Hakey fired shots into the mosque next door to his house from his yard. He had posted on his facebook page – “I hate Muslims” and other anti- Muslim sentiments. He was arrested. Between the incident and his trial, he met with persons from the mosque. The members of the mosque forgave him. They even developed a relationship, a positive relationship. At his trial, members of the mosque even requested he not get jail time. While sentencing guidelines recommended he go to jail for 8-14 months, he ended up being sentenced to only 6 months. So maybe the pleas of these Muslim persons had an effect. Ted was released in Jan 2017 after serving his 6 months.

While in jail, Ted was visited about twice a month by Zahir Mannan, the mosque outreach director. Zahir explained that when a mosque is the victim of violence, it does not make Muslims want to close the doors of the mosques. It makes them want to open those doors to individuals who do not understand the Islam, to be able to teach others about their faith. Zahir explains that the Quran states, “Repel evil with what is good and your enemy will become your friend.” I think making your enemy your friend sounds a lot like love your enemy.

During an interview upon his release, Ted stated, “If I had just walked over one time and spoke to them this would have never have happened, my views would have been completely different. I had no idea. I just believed all the things you hear on social media, all the negative things, I just didn’t have any education about Islam at all.”

Through their visits while Ted was in prison, Ted and Zahir became friends and want to use their relationship to encourage others to enter into conversation. This unlikely friendship comes from a place shared by the teachings of the Quran and the teachings of Jesus – teachings that are based in love.

My second story I learned about not through the news, but through the words of a contemporary Christian songwriter, Matthew West. He wrote his song “Forgiveness” based upon a real life story. The song is the story of the mother of a 20 year old girl who was killed by a 24 year old drunk driver. He was sentenced to 22 years in prison. The mother explained that she was filled with rage at this young man and it was eating away at her. Society told her that she had the right to be angry and hold a grudge. But she couldn’t live that way. Instead, she let go of her rage and found it in her heart to forgive that drunk driver. She told him that she forgave him. She even convinced other family members to forgive him. Then they went to the judge and asked that his sentence be decreased from 22 years to 11, which it was. That the young man told that mother that he would not have cared if his sentence had not been reduced, because her forgiveness was unbelievable and meant so much to him. That mother’s forgiveness transformed her life, the lives of her family and the life of that young man.

My final story is about a school shooting in an Amish school house in Nickel House, PA in 2006. A 32 year old man, a milk truck driver whose infant daughter died 9 years earlier, was mad at God and decided to kill young girls to get even with God. He went into that schoolhouse and shot 10 girls, 5 of whom died. He then killed himself.

The killer’s parents were in shock, unable to grasp how their son had done this horrific thing. His mother thought that they would have to move. But something amazing happened.

The parents whose daughters had died did the unthinkable. Nothing can take away the horror of this event. Nothing. Nothing can take away the tragedy or the pain of the loss of those girls. But the parents of those girls did something remarkable. Those parents went to the cemetery for the service of the killer. They told his mother that they forgave her son. The couple who had lost 2 daughters were actually the first people to offer that mother their condolences. The forgiveness and love of these parents overwhelmed the killer's mother and convinced her to stay. She later said, "For the mother and father who had lost not just one but two daughters at the hand of our son, to come up and be the first ones to greet us -- wow. Is there anything in this life that we should not forgive?"

The forgiveness of those parents transformed that mother's life. Donald Kraybill, a sociologist at a nearby college who co-authored the book, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*, said this about the Amish communities response to their tragedy. "I think the most powerful demonstration of the depth of Amish forgiveness was when members of the Amish community went to the killer's burial service at the cemetery," Kraybill says. "Several families, Amish families who had buried their own daughters just the day before were in attendance and they hugged the widow, and hugged other members of the killer's family."

Later, that Amish community took up a collection - for the widow of that man who had killed their daughters. That man was not Amish but they had known him because he had delivered milk to them. That community gave the money they collected to his wife and three young children.

And the mother of that killer, who was amazed at the forgiveness and the love of the community, has been going to the home of one of the surviving girls for years to help to care for her. Of that Kraybill said, "You have this mother who raised a son who did this horrific damage to this young woman and the mother has the courage and spiritual fortitude to come back and care for this young woman, and the parents of the young woman welcome her into their home. It's a powerful, powerful story."

I admit that the examples I have shared with you are extraordinary – though they are only three examples of many. But these stories are examples of what happens when people take the radical words of Jesus to heart, when people live

the radical words of Jesus. While I hope that none of us is ever in the position of the victims in the stories I have shared with you, perhaps, just perhaps we can look at our anger, even if society says it's justified, at our grudges, and at our prejudices. Perhaps we can look at them with Jesus' words of radical love and forgiveness in our minds and in our hearts. Perhaps we can make changes in ourselves. If we all start small, if we all spread Jesus' radical message with our lives through small acts of love and forgiveness, perhaps it can make a difference. Perhaps it can heal our relationships, perhaps it can heal our wounded world one little piece at a time.

May it be so.