

Red Letter Christians
Matthew 5:13-16, 21-26
February 12, 2017 – Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

I've recently been reading a book entitled *Red Letter Revolution* by Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo. I highly recommend this book, and you can read more about it in my next Agape newsletter article. The entire book is a conversation between Claiborne and Campolo on the state of Christianity today. Claiborne particularly notes something that I have stated from the pulpit in the past: the ultraconservative religious right has largely hijacked the word *evangelical* and to some extent even the word *Christian*. I will tell you, my congregation, that I am an evangelical. I openly proclaim Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and I seek to lead my life in a way that models that proclamation, as a loving, caring, sharing person seeking the spread the Good News of God's amazing love in any way I can. However, if I told the average person on the street that I am an evangelical, they would cast me as someone who is anti-gay, anti-Muslim, opposed to many governmental social programs, opposed to governmental regulation of the environment, pro-life but in favor of the death penalty, in favor of military spending to further my particular agenda, and politically, a right-wing conservative; and nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, I would never tell the person on the street that I'm an evangelical unless I knew that I had significant time to explain myself.

And so, Claiborne and Campolo recognize that there are those of us who, while we would call ourselves *progressive* (We used to call ourselves *liberal* but that's become a dirty word.); but, while we would call ourselves *progressive*, we take the words of Jesus seriously, indeed literally. Thus the subtitle of their book: "What if Jesus meant what he said." Now, when I say that I take the words of Jesus literally, don't hear that I believe to the entire Bible to be either 100% historically or scientifically accurate. I've stated before that the Bible is a book about theology and faith, not a history book; and most certainly not a science book. But yes, I believe that words of Jesus form a call for every Christian.

Red Letter Christians. . . the label is derived from the fact that starting in the end of the 19th Century, some Bibles published all the words of Jesus in red, thereby emphasizing those words, setting them apart from the rest of the scriptures. Now I don't want to diminish the rest of the scriptures; they are hugely important. The writings of Paul have helped shape my faith. The prophets have reinforced my call. The Psalms have guided my prayer life. The ancient writing of the Hebrew Bible have provided hope in times of despair. But the words of Jesus. . . The words of Jesus provide the model for daily living. The words of Jesus shape my life.

And, if we're looking for those red letters, the Sermon on the Mount is a very good place to start. Last week, we began with the beatitudes. At that time, I told you the chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's Gospel make up the Sermon on the Mount, and all three chapters are entirely in red letters. Remember, a few weeks back, we commented that chapter four formed the introduction to Jesus ministry – a ministry about the kingdom of God, a ministry that is counter-cultural, and a ministry of community. Now, at the beginning of chapter five we're told that Jesus what up on the mountain and sat down; his disciples came to him; and he began to speak and teach them. And Jesus proceeds for three chapters; and those three chapters could easily be called the manual for discipleship. Those three chapters truly define what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, what it means to truly be “a red letter Christian.” You see, being a red letter Christian is not about what we believe, but how we live.

I've mentioned before, that the most important question that was ever asked of me was not asked by my ordination committee. It was not asked by my bishop. It was not asked by my interview committee at this church. It was not even asked by my wife when I asked her to marry me. The most important question I've ever been asked came from a sidewalk preacher on public square in downtown Cleveland. I had entered into a conversation with this gentleman, and he found out that I profess a faith in Jesus Christ. Then he asked me, “Do the folks were you work know you're a Christian? Do they know you're a Christian by the way you live?” I truly can think of no more important question – “Do folks know you're a Christian by the way you live?” Yes, Martin Luther said we are justified, we are made right with God by our faith alone. But John Wesley said, if we have a true faith it will shape our lives. Indeed folks will know we are Christians.

Again, I state that the ideal model for Christian living is the Sermon on the Mount. We don't have the time to cover the entire Sermon in our next few Sundays. I hope you'll go home, sit down and read the entire three chapters. In the way of introduction, I present one Greek word: *dikaiosyne*. This word comes up several times in the Sermon. Sometimes it's translated *piety*. Other times it's translated *righteousness* or *justice*. *Dikaiosyne* is the central characteristic of a disciple of Jesus Christ. It means doing what God requires, acting faithfully in relationship with God and God's children, and fulfilling God's purpose. It means an equality for all God's people, just access to necessary resources, and good stewardship of God's creation.

So today's lesson, picks up right after the Beatitudes; and it starts by making the call to “doing” clear. You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, of what good is it? What's Jesus saying. . . You've got to do something.

You've got to flavor the food. You've got to be an agent for change, for goodness, for better living, for preservation. That's the role of salt.

Next comes one of my favorite parts of the entire Sermon. It is a direct call to discipleship: "You are the light of the world. . . Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Friends, the call to action doesn't get any stronger than that. Let your light shine to all the world. Do the good works. Give God all the glory. That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Then comes the next section. . . Do not maintain your anger toward others, but always seek reconciliation. Yes, I recognize that anger is a natural human emotion. I have personally even told people who are experiencing difficult times that it's okay to be angry with God; and I mean it. I fully believe that our loving God can wrap his proverbial arms around all that anger and quiet it. Still I have a huge respect for those who can truly meet anger with love; and share that love with all people. I'm reminded of a group of Buddhist monks who did a huge sand painting on the mall in Washington, D.C. Just as they were finishing their work, a group of malicious runners ran through the painting, destroying it. Their sponsor began to apologize at length; and the monks responded, "My dear friend, I'm not sure why you are so upset. We have plenty of sand. We will fix it."

Yes, anger is a natural human emotion, but it's also an emotion that can eat at one's very soul. Jesus says that one who is angry or insolent to another is liable to judgment and the hell of fire. Well, I'm not sure about the afterlife; but I tell you that I have no doubt. Anger, insults, and retaliatory acts can, without a doubt, lead to hell on earth. It can eat at a person, destroying physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Thus, Jesus instruction: First be reconciled with your brother and sister. Then, in a pure, reconciled, I might even say holy state, offer your gifts to God.

I cannot close without addressing Jesus' admonition against divorce. Friends, divorce is always a sad and painful thing; and never to be taken lightly. I will never forget a co-worker of mine telling me that she was going to get married. I replied, "Are you sure? You've only known this guy a couple months." She responded, "Well, if it doesn't work, I'll get a divorce." That statement tore at the very core of my being. It tore at the very core of the vows that I hold so sacred. Marriage is not to be taken so lightly. Still, there have been a few times in my ministry when I have actually counseled couples to divorce. In most cases the marriage had deteriorated into an abusive relationship or at least into a situation where the marriage existed in name only. Any true relationship has ceased years earlier.

So what about Jesus' admonition against divorce? Here I do believe we need to take the cultural context into account. In the first century, a man could

divorce a woman at the drop of a hat, for no reason, without consequences for the man. On the other hand, it was almost impossible for a woman to initiate a divorce; and a divorced woman faced a huge social stigma. She was considered a disgrace to her family, and damaged goods to other men. She was generally dependent of the good graces of family or friends to take her in, or she was forced to turn to prostitution to make a living. I've said before that Jesus cared about women. Jesus admonition against divorce is a protection for women. In this twenty-first century, yes, I believe God's heart breaks a little whenever a marriage is dissolved. I also don't believe God wants his children to suffer in an unhappy or even abusive relationship. Yes, divorce should always be a last resort; but I support and I believe God supports those who find it the only viable option to moving forward in service to Christ.

We'll hear more about the call to discipleship next week. It's a call to *dikaiosyne*, a call to piety, and righteousness, and justice. It's a call to love and peace. It's a call not just to believing, but to doing. It's a call to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Praise be to God."

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
Let us be the light that shines to the world,
a beacon of hope and peace, of righteousness and justice,
a beacon of love.
Amen.

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