**GREENLAND HILLS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**February 5, 2017 5th Sunday after Epiphany**

**SCRIPTURE** (Common English Bible) Matthew 5:13–20

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

“Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them. I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality. Therefore, whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the lowest in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps these commands and teaches people to keep them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. I say to you that unless your righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

**SERMON** *Beyond Righteousness* Roy Atwood

When I was younger, I was very much a rules-follower. I saw everything in black and white, right and wrong. In fact, my mother says that in elementary school, I would often come home from school and complain that people weren’t following the rules of four square at recess. Now that I have a captive audience, I’d like to explain why elementary school me was absolutely justified in my complaints. In case you don’t know, four square is a game you play with a rubber ball and four squares drawn on the ground. One player stands in each square, and when the ball bounces in your square, you hit it into someone else’s square. If you hit it out-of-bounds, hit it back down into your own square, or miss the ball altogether, then you are out and you must go to the back of the line. Now at my elementary school, the line could get up to 10 or 15 kids long, so these were some high-stakes games of four square. If you got out, you could be waiting in line another 10 minutes before you’d get to play again.

The problem was that people would make up all these alternative “rules” that allowed you to yell some phrase that nullified the normal rules of four square. I’m so scarred by these phrases that I still remember two of them – “cherry bomb” and “break the glass.” I didn’t remember what yelling these phrases allowed you to do though, so I did some internet sleuthing to find out. What I found was appalling. If you yelled “cherry bomb,” you no longer were required to simply bounce the ball in another person’s square. Instead, you could grab the ball, run at another person, and throw it onto the ground in their square with such force that the ball would fly into the sky, making it impossible for that person to hit the ball, which meant they were out and they had to go to the back of the line. “Cherry bomb” is basically legalized bullying. Frankly, I find it barbaric and an affront to the sanctity of the game of four square. If that’s what yelling “cherry bomb” let you do, I could hardly imagine the atrocities of “break the glass.” Unfortunately, after a thorough five-minute internet search, I could not find any information on “break the glass,” which could only mean that it is so heinous that all of humanity has suppressed it from our collective memory. As you can see, I’ve clearly recovered from the black-and-white mentality of my youth.

In all seriousness, though, I have grown a lot since I was a kid. As I went through high school and college, I started to appreciate the nuances of the world and the importance of understanding perspectives different than my own. One of my favorite books that I read in college is called *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* by Adam Hamilton, the lead pastor at the biggest Methodist church in the country in Kansas City and a fellow graduate of Perkins School of Theology at SMU, assuming I don’t do anything crazy enough between now and May 15th to fail my internship, of course. In the book, he talks about how dangerous it is to be a legalistic, rule-follower. He says, “Our quest for truth, certainty, purity of doctrine, and our tendency to label others who don’t agree with us, to separate from them and to demonize them, lead us back to black-and-white, either/or thinking. I am right and you are wrong. I am faithful and you are unfaithful. … But the hope for the future of Christianity will be found, in part, in our willingness to accept that no one of us has all of the truth.”

Which is why, at first glance, this Scripture passage is so disturbing. In the second paragraph, verses 17 through 20, Jesus talks about how important rules are and how we must follow every one of them. He says in verse 18, “I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality.” The Law Jesus is referring to here is the Law found in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In these books, we find all sorts of rules – the ten commandments, moral laws about how to treat other people, social laws about property and inheritance, food laws about what food is clean and what food is unclean, purity laws about what to do when you’re diseased or bleeding, laws about what feasts to hold, laws about what sacrifices and offerings to make, and laws about the priesthood and about the Temple. In fact, Jewish tradition holds that the Torah contains 613 distinct commandments. And Jesus is saying here that these commandments – the Law – will be valid forever, that whoever ignores them will be the lowest in heaven, and whoever keeps the commandments will be called great in heaven. He even says that your righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the people who are experts in the law!

Now you might be thinking, “I thought the whole point of Jesus was that we didn’t have to follow these Old Testament laws anymore.” And that’s how many Christians characterize the Law of the Torah – rules that are no longer necessary because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When I was in Palestine last month, a Palestinian Christian scholar impressed on us that Jews and Muslims are a lot more similar than they think because both of their religions require them to be obedient to rules, but Christianity is different because it isn’t rule-oriented.

So, what do we do when Jesus says we must follow even the smallest pen stroke of the Law? Well, we read on to find out what he means. Through the rest of Matthew chapter 5, from verses 21 to 48, Jesus talks about six commandments from the Law using the following format: You have heard it said, commandment, But I say, reinterpretation of that commandment. For example, verses 21 and 22 read: “You have heard it said to those who lived long ago, *‘Don’t commit murder,’* and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgement. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgement.” See, he says, you have heard it said, commandment (don’t commit murder), but I say, reinterpretation of the commandment (don’t even be angry).

Now, is Jesus being hypocritical here? After all, he just said, “follow every letter of the law.” How does he think he can get away with saying follow every law and then reinterpreting all the laws? What Jesus is illustrating here – and the crux of my message today – is that following a law doesn’t mean following the letter of the law, but instead following the spirit of the law. Following a law doesn’t mean following the letter of the law, but instead following the spirit of the law. For our righteousness to exceed the righteousness of the legal experts, we can’t just follow the law word-for-word. We must go beyond righteousness to living out the spirit of the law, the underlying meaning of the law.

So, a law about not murdering others is, in truth, a law about not being angry. Laws about adultery and divorce are laws about not abusing power and privilege. A law about not swearing false oaths is a law about having integrity. A law about retaliation – an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth – is better understood as a law about avoiding violence – turn the other cheek.

All of which leads Jesus to the conclusion of his argument at the end of chapter five: “You have heard that it was said, *‘You must love your neighbor’* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. Just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.” You see, following the letter of the law lets us off easy by allowing us to practice limited love. If we don’t murder anyone or forcibly remove their eyes and teeth, then we’ve had a successful day, according to the limited love of the literal, letter-of-the-law mentality. But the spirit-of-the-law mentality requires of us unconditional love, praying for both our neighbor and our enemy. This law of unlimited love is at the heart of all of Jesus’s spirit-of-the-law teaching. In fact, you could argue, that unconditional love is the spirit of the entire Gospel, the entire message of the New Testament. Every other law or teaching or commandment is simply an interpretation and application of Jesus’s instruction to love unconditionally.

A couple of years ago, I had the honor of attending a commencement ceremony where Representative John Lewis was the keynote speaker. John Lewis, as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was one of the six civil rights leaders who organized the 1963 March on Washington. I read his autobiography for a course in college, and he’s been one of my heroes ever since, for the way he put his Christian faith into action. In his keynote speech, Lewis talked about how his parents gave him the rule that he wasn’t allowed to get into trouble. He wasn’t allowed to get into trouble. Thankfully, Lewis grew to understand that the spirit of Christianity - unconditional love - necessitated breaking the rules sometimes, both his parents’ rules and the laws of the country. He knew that he had to get in trouble to help bring about what Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community – a place with no poverty, no hunger, no homelessness, no discrimination, no bigotry, and no prejudice. Lewis stood there and told that crowd of impressionable graduates, “You must find a way to get in the way. You must find a way to get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble.”

Are there any rules today where we should be following the spirit of the law instead of the letter of it, where we should use the guide of unconditional love to reinterpret literal interpretations? Well, I think the Bible is a great place to start. In the New Testament, we find a variety of rules that were originally intended as loving guidance, but we no longer consider them to be loving, rules like the ones that say women shouldn’t speak in church, that being gay is unnatural and shameful, and that divorce should only be limited to instances of adultery. We reinterpret these rules because we allow the spirit of the law – unconditional love – to overcome the letter of the law.

That law about divorce, by the way, comes from Jesus’s teaching in this very chapter. It may sound crazy, but I think we can follow some of Jesus’s teachings best by reinterpreting them. The underlying spirit of Jesus’s teachings and the teachings in the rest of the New Testament is the standard of unconditional love. Naturally, unconditional love looks different in 1st century Jerusalem than it does in 21st century Dallas. So, we shouldn’t be following the letter of the law written 2000 years ago in an entirely different context. Instead, we should be engaged in the process of discovering what the spirit of the law – the standard of unconditional love – looks like in our own context today.

Of course, as John Lewis pointed out, when you don’t follow the literal letter of the law, you’re going to get into trouble, especially with the black-and-white, rule followers of the world. I’m sure plenty of us have frustrated family, friends, and the churches of our youth by refusing to follow their literal interpretations of scripture, and instead following the underlying meaning of scripture, the spirit of the law, Jesus’s teachings on unconditional love. Letting unconditional love be our guide will require us to break some rules. It will cause us to get in trouble. But this won’t be just any trouble. It will be good trouble. It will be necessary trouble. So, let’s get in some necessary trouble today. Amen.