

“Listening to Jesus”
February 12, 2023

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Matthew 5:38-48

Seasons change. Life changes. What once seemed so right now seems dated or out of place or inappropriate. Here and there we see a lone, left-over poinsettia—a limp remnant of Christmas joy. Our December celebration of the light of God shining in the darkness gives way to longer hours of daylight with each new week. And so, the star and the Advent candles have been packed away. We no longer need them and their encouragement.

As the scriptures are read in worship, we no longer hear of an infant. We encounter the adult Jesus. He speaks to us of the past and the present. We listen as best we can and start to raise our own questions even as his words question us.

Jesus speaks to us: “But I say to you...”

How should we listen?

How should we listen when he makes difficult and challenging statements such as:

Turn the other cheek.

Go the extra mile.

Love your enemies.

Be perfect.

If you weren't squirming at least a little bit during that reading from the Gospel of Matthew, then you probably weren't listening very closely.

How should we listen?

There are those who would explain these statements away into insignificance.

You know: scholars tell us that it was considered extremely offensive in the ancient world to be slapped by the back of the right hand, which is most likely what happens if someone strikes you on the right cheek. By turning the other cheek, you make it almost impossible to be slapped in that way again. So, really, you're just protecting yourself. The words of Jesus become a bit of historical trivia. It's safe way to listen to Jesus, but don't expect his words to have much significance for our lives today.

In a similar manner, others suggest that we not take Jesus too seriously. They tell us that these are ancient words spoken to ancient people that have little to do with our modern situation. In a violent and abusive world, we can't be turning the other cheek all the time.

In a dog-eat-dog world, we can't be expected to love our enemies. And we know the psychological damage that the relentless pursuit of perfection can cause. While we might admire the spiritual teachings of Jesus, we have to take his words with a grain of salt. After all, you know how Jesus resorts to hyperbole and exaggeration for effect. An easy literalism will only lead to misunderstanding.

There are those who would counter and say that a literal approach is just what we need. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Love your enemies. Such tactics would never work in our time unless....well, unless you are willing follow, say, two of the towering leaders of the 20th century—Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both men looked to the non-violent Jesus for inspiration. Wasn't it G. K. Chesterton who told us that the words of Jesus have not been tried and found wanting; they are still wanting to be tried. Following the words of Jesus can lead us into a deeper and more productive resistance to evil than we might think possible.

This is not advice for the powerful to give to the powerless. Non-violent action is a strategy for the powerless that grows out of powerlessness. Within twenty years after the occupying Roman government had destroyed Jerusalem, the follower of Jesus—those with little if any power of their own—remembered his life and his words of love, his way of genuine resistance that overcomes evil with good.

So, we might listen and hear in the words of Jesus a challenge and a call to a new way of life. We confess that we don't live as he calls us to live—but what if we did? What might happen if even occasionally we *did* love our enemies or were honest in our speech or gave without the expectation of something in return? We might not become perfect—but we'd certainly be better people than we are. And who knows—the world might be a better place as well.

Or we can listen and hear Jesus setting the bar so impossibly high that we recognize that we can never make the mark, never follow in his way. Some would say that's just the point of the Sermon on the Mount. As we listen, we realize that we are simply unable to live as Jesus calls us to live. Consequently, we are thrown onto the mercy of the God who is our only hope. With the awareness that we are *not* perfect as God is perfect, we welcome with gladness the grace of God into our lives. Only by seeing the impossible can we also see the new possibility that comes into the world and into our lives in Jesus.

When you listen to Jesus, what do you hear?

Insignificance?

A figurative, spiritual suggestion?

A literal command?

A challenge?

An impossibility?

When Jesus speaks, we need to listen in many different ways because, when Jesus speaks, he often means many different things at once.

So, let me suggest one more way to listen.

Let us listen in order to hear that God is doing something new.

Let us listen so that we can hear that God continues to work in our lives and in our world.

“You have heard it said...but I say to you...”

You know how seasons change, how life changes, how what once seemed so right now seems dated or out of place or inappropriate. As the hymn says: “New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth.” Jesus lived in his time and recognized what was good and valuable in the traditions of his culture. At the same time, Jesus was always out ahead of his time and his disciples. And Jesus is always out ahead of his church, calling us beyond the ways that were acceptable in the past.

An eye for an eye was a humane approach to punishment. It was a novel way of thinking about revenge. It put a limit on what might be demanded by one who had been wronged: not two eyes for an eye; not two teeth for one. It was a better way. It put a restraint on the very human desire to violently strike back at an enemy. By the time of Jesus, this law was expanded and allowed for monetary payment instead of the taking of an eye.

Yet for Jesus, even this did not go far enough in showing men and women the way of love that is the way of God. Jesus challenges his followers to renounce their right to retaliation.

Jesus calls us beyond the good of the past into the good that God is creating today.

Jesus calls us beyond the love of the past into the love that God is creating today.

Listen.

As Jesus speaks, we hear not only commands for a new way of living at one time in the distant past but also—and more importantly for us—a model of how the Spirit of Christ continues to work in the world—releasing us from old strictures, expanding the territory of love, defining the moral life in new and sometimes startling ways.

Instead of offering a new law or new rules to follow, in these opening words of his ministry Jesus tells us that God’s ongoing work of creation will continue to bring new possibilities and new life when human ways have become brittle, worn out, exclusive, and lacking in love.

Such new formulations do not simply negate tradition. They open up and expand the tradition to an ever-increasing number of people and for an ever-increasing amount of good.

Here at the Congregational UCC we've been listening to Jesus in this way for some time now. In our church covenant, the agreement that we make with each other, we promise to "walk together in the ways of Jesus Christ, known *and to be made known*." If for no other reason, I would be a member of this congregation because it speaks of Christ's way as an open path and will always be an open path. We discover that path as we walk the way together.

As we choose to follow in the new ways that God opens to us, we will discover a surprising result. "You will be perfect," Jesus says, "as God is perfect."

The translation in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that we read this morning—and usually read in worship—misses the implication of the Greek with its flat command: "Be perfect." We all know there's not much chance of that.

But Jesus calls us, calls this congregation, calls the whole church into the future: you *shall be* perfect. That is, as we live in love we will share in God's nature. The New Testament scholar, Douglas Hare, says that with these words Jesus gives a strong invitation to participate in God's perfection by imitating the divine behavior. This call is modeled on those words from Leviticus that we heard this morning: "You *shall be* holy." We who are made in the image of God are open to imitate God's love. Jesus invites us to the on-going, and yes, difficult, task of being all-embracing in our lives in imitation of God, whose love embraces all.

Seasons change. The light grows.

From this place, the light of Christ continues to shine in new ways for our time.

In each new day, God is doing something new in your life, in this congregation, and in our world. The old ways are changing—the old ways are always changing—and as followers of Christ we are called to keep up, to announce to the world the newness of God, and to let our light shine.