

**Three Stories: One Sermon**  
**Matthew 5:13-48      Tim Dickau      February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**The Perpetual Question around Vocation**

I have three stories to tell you today, all of which are related, although I'll leave it to you to connect some of the dots. There's a fourth story I hope you will help write after I tell the first three. All these stories have to do with one of the core questions we ask as humans: what are we here for? What is our vocation, our calling? It's a common question in our community. Almost every week in my pastoral meetings, someone voices a question like: "What should I do with my life?" It's that kind of question that keeps Tim Warkentin employed doing life plans. These stories I am going to tell today are part way to an answer. They are stories about vocation.

**Story #1**

Ok. Story #1. Near the beginning of civilizations, God created a people through Abram and Sarah and gave them a promise, a gigantic promise, the kind of promise that sets you on a course for life. God spoke these words into Abram's life: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." And this huge promise of global blessing was only the beginning of the wondrous deeds God would do for this people. Later, God rescued Abraham and Sarah's offspring from slavery in Egypt with a mighty act of deliverance. Then God gave them land and a life code, a way of life that reflected God's commitment to justice and mercy so that they may reflect the character of God in the world and be the people through whom God healed the world. Plenty of people throughout human history have struggled with a finding a sense of purpose or vocation. If ever a people had a sure and meaningful purpose to devote themselves to, it was this small nation in Palestine. Theirs was a clear and worthy calling. What's more, it's a vocation which the story of the whole world hinged upon. This was a weighty vocation. A great gift! And a great responsibility!

However, this blessed people squandered this vocation time and time again. This small nation grumbled and stumbled their way through history and through the reign of various Judges and Kings. The people regularly turned away from the way of justice and shalom described in the Torah and instead turned inward, expecting God to make them great for their own sakes, apart from any vocation to bless others. The prophet Isaiah described their path in terms of a child and parent:

"I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me...they have forsaken the LORD; Wash and make yourselves clean...stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

Eventually, the relationship broke down to the point of separation. God allowed them to go into exile in order to wake them up to God's good purposes. Still God would not give up on them. Later, the same prophet writes these words to an exiled people.

"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

While the people remained half-hearted in their commitment to this vocation. This first story is one of mostly failed vocation. Yet God's promise to heal their land and bless the world through this people endured. This was a story that awaited a resolution.

## **Story #2**

There once was a man who went around Israel announcing that God was returning among the people to become king at last and restore the people to their true vocation. But it wasn't the vocation that many of the Pharisees were calling them to take up – a call to violent revolution to knock off their enemies and regain their former glory. This man called them to a vocation many had forgotten, a vocation to again become light on a hill that dispels darkness, salt that flavors and preserves all that is good. He reminded them that this was the main plot of their holy book all along. He claimed that he had come bring this story back on track and fulfill this narrative, right down to the fine print.

BUT, he also warned them that it was a critical moment in their history: if they abandoned their true vocation now, they were at risk of writing themselves right out of the story. If they refused his help to become a people who bring light to the gentiles, if they continued to turn the light in on themselves with their fixation on a certain kind of purity that created tall fences and kept many out, they would write themselves out of the story.

To lead them out of their self-imposed prisons and back to their vocation as a salty and light bearing people, he offered them a picture of what a light-bearing community would look like. To paint this picture, he comments on six specific commands from the Torah. Each of them followed this pattern: “you heard it said...but I say unto you...” Together these six antitheses described what it would look like for them to become a people who were a light to the world.

These six antitheses address issues that have perplexed or plagued humanity for its entire history -- murder, adultery and divorce, oaths, revenge, and hatred of enemies. Jesus' commentaries or interpretations of these laws looked quite different from the group who were the professional interpreters of the time, the scribes and Pharisees.

What vocational picture did these six renewed laws offer then? We might sum them up with this way: Jesus invited them to the way of creative resistance – a creative resistance that aimed towards restoration.

### **Six Antitheses**

Notice the specifics of these six antitheses. As you listen to these, I want you to think about where you or where we are being called to move deeper into living these out. I will ask you at the end so I encourage you to start thinking about that now. First, this wasn't an ethic that set the bar low so that we could easily jump over it; this was an ethic that aimed much higher. So it wasn't just murder that was to be avoided, it was the anger against your brother or sister that was to be nipped in the bud so that you could actually settle matters with your adversary. Likewise, it wasn't just about avoiding adultery; rather it was about resisting lingering lust, about men and women treating each other with a new kind of dignity. Let lust control your life and there's a good chance you'll end up crashing and burning – or tossed into the burning trash heap outside of Jerusalem – which is what the word translated as hell literally referred to. This ethic wasn't about just having the right procedures to carry out divorce. While Jesus acknowledges that marriages can reach breaking points when people chose someone else, he had come to heal the underlying hardness of heart that drives us towards divorce. He offers hope of restoration. Nor was this ethic about trying to invoke God's name to give weight to your promises; instead, make a practice of telling the truth and you won't get into troublesome situations.

In the last two antitheses, Jesus gets to the heart of what the people were missing in their understanding of the Torah. God is merciful and generous to God's own enemies. If they were going to reflect the God who made this covenant with them, then they would need to learn how to take up this way of truth and love, especially with those who they hated.

What Jesus calls them to is a creative resistance aimed at restorative justice. “You’ve heard it said, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. By the way, the original law was meant to limit violence by the way. If you knock out my tooth, I can’t beat you up and burn your house down.” That’s not an equal response. But Jesus goes further and challenges the idea of fighting evil with evil or seeking revenge at all. That’s not the way of God.

Instead, he says that if someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the other one towards him. The idea here was that a hit on the right cheek was most likely a slap with the back of a hand. That’s not just bullying, that’s an insult. It implies that the person sees you as an inferior. So turning the other cheek is like saying, “fine, hit me back, but this time as an equal. Do that and the person striking you might realize that they are harming a fellow human of equal value. Similarly, if someone wants to take your shirt, let him have your cloak too. This isn’t just about giving a bully more clothes. Most people only had a shirt and cloak. This is about giving him the only other garment you are wearing and shaming or exposing his actions: this was after all what the temple establishment and the rich were doing to the poor after all anyways—taking the shirt of their backs. Or take the comment about the soldier. If a soldier forces you to carry his equipment one mile – which was a Roman law – carry it two. In other words, the soldier who commandeers the services of a Galilean villager must be met with astonishing generosity. The soldier is likely to be amazed; he may even get in trouble with his commanding officer for breaking the law. All these examples involved meeting enemies with a creative resistance that aimed towards a restorative justice.

### **Jesus Practices what he Preaches**

The thing is, Jesus didn’t just teach about this way of life, he lived it. In a culture of serious inequality between men and women, Jesus elevated the status of women and undermined stereotypes of masculinity. Mary Magdalene, Mary, Martha – these are the names of women who were like family with Jesus, women whom he offered a rare dignity in a patriarchal culture. Jesus made promises and kept them, particularly his promise that he would give his life and rise again. Jesus loved his enemies. When he was beaten and placed on a cross to die, he offered forgiveness to his murderers.

Jesus not only practiced what he preached, he also took on the enemies that stop humanity from living into our true vocation. He delivered people from evil forces, he took on shame and offered restoration and healing as with the woman who was bleeding who touched him. On the cross, he took on the weight of Israel’s failed vocation and lived faithful to his Father to the very end, defeating the power of sin and death there for us so that we might be freed to live fruitfully in the world.

This second story then is a story of recovered vocation. Recovered vocation. Jesus pointed the way for how we can live in ways that bear the light of God. He modeled this fully human image of God in his life. He overcame the powers that stop us from living in ways that bear God’s image more fully. This second story is one of recovered vocation.

### **Story #3**

There once was a group of people who began meeting on a small hill in East Vancouver 110 years ago. They gathered here because they believed that they had a vocation to bear witness to the light of God in what was then a newly developing suburb. And the light did shine throughout the years as they became known as a community that welcomed many children and began serving free meals during the depression. It seems that something got into the DNA of this community early as these marks have continued on.

At some point along the way however, people lost something of that vision and purpose. They became disconnected from this neighborhood and that collective light started to fade. At one church meeting in the 80's, they came to a general consensus that they would soon fold up their tent here.

But that light began to flicker again. Some small embers starting to spark. In the mid-90's, people started meeting in small groups to talk. A group began praying for the neighborhood together on Wednesday mornings. And people began to dream again. It wasn't long before, Salsbury community houses, Kinbrace, Crossroads all were birthed.

Early on in those prayer gatherings, much of the conversation was about how we could find a way of life together, a common vocation, one that would take Jesus and the restoring work of God seriously.

### **Vocation: More than just a Job**

In our culture, we often restrict questions of vocation to what job or career we pursue. And jobs can be an important piece of our vocation. We've done at least 4 preaching series on work and faith for the purpose, to stir our imaginations about how we might pursue God's renewed world in the workplace. Tim Warkentin and I are running a leadership development course to equip you to lead well both here in what we do together but also in your workplace. Andrew was telling me that what he learned chairing council really enhanced his leadership abilities in his workplace.

But vocation is so much bigger than our jobs. Just think about it. If you aren't in paid work or "retired", does that mean you no longer have a vocation? Absolutely not.

Part of what we recognized early on is that if we were to develop a way of life together, we'd need to spend some more time doing life together, at least with a few other folks. We sought to structure our lives in ways that allowed us to do that, whether it was by moving closer to others, sharing a house together, forming home groups that became more than just a discussion night, working alongside each other in the initiatives we developed. We knew we'd need more of a shared life if we were to find a common vocation. After all, God has always been on about forming a people, who become light bearing together, not just a bunch of individual matchsticks.

We were yearning and searching not just a common life though but a common way of life with shared practices and commitments. Like many other folks pursuing this communal life around common practices, the sermon on the mount became central in shaping the kind of life we started pursuing.

The passage we have looked at today is at the center of that vision. What we have pursued is life where married people and single people share life together, supporting one another in these parts of our vocation. We've sought a way of being together as men and women that honors one another and empowers all of us to become our fullest selves. The retreat last weekend was new step in this direction. We've been seeking a way of life where we can settle our disputes, where confession and forgiveness aren't just part of our vocabulary in worship but are part of our practice in daily life, especially in those moments where we really are struggling to stay together. The gift of healing prayer that many folks are moving through on Bowen Island this weekend is one context where these movements of confession and forgiveness have been so transformative. We've also sought a way of life where we resist the polarizing separation from those we disagree with, where we learn to love those who become enemies.

One example that comes to mind is the repentance walk on Good Friday some years back when one of our neighbors started yelling at us, well mostly at me, because he was so mad about the co-here housing development. I think I was given a royal title - the prince of evil. After the walk, a group of folks went back to listen to his concerns. Simeon and Celeste invited him to their wedding. I liked that one. We need these creative attempts to make our enemies our friends. In this case, our neighbor responds quite differently towards us now. Jesus' vision is of a restorative kind of justice.

This third story, the story of our church's journey over the last three decades, is a story of discovered vocation. We've discovered and are discovering a common way of living. The development of the lay order is one way to hold us committing to this way of life. Our Seven seeds of the kingdom including hospitality, pursuit of justice, creativity, care for creation are all part of the vocation that we have taken up. If we practice these together, we believe that we can reflect the light of God in our city.

If you've wondered if you have a vocation, a calling, I hope today that this question has been put to rest. YES, you have a vocation. Or better, WE have a vocation. This is part of the good news of the gospel. God has come in Christ so that we might recover our true vocation, so that we might discover what it is to be a distinctive people who bear witness to the God in whose image all of us and all of our neighbors are created to reflect. We are to be a light on this little hill in East Van, salt that flavors and preserves all that is good in every corner of the city we inhabit.

Here's where the fourth story comes in however. Because this way of life shaped by the sermon on the mount that we are discovering can never be taken for granted. You can't coast on this journey or you'll coast right to a stop. Each new generation of the church has to be deliberate in searching for, seeking and striving after this kind of life.

I invite you to think back to those 6 sayings of Jesus. Where are we being called to dig deeper into the kind of vision Jesus offers us in this passage?

Where are you being called to go deeper in living out the sermon on the mount?

Silence – then hear from you.

Listen to the Spirit for these two questions: one for you personally, one for us corporately.

Where are you being called to go deeper in living out the sermon on the mount?

Where are we being called to dig deeper into the kind of vision Jesus offers us in this passage?