

Message: "The Tougher Teachings of Jesus"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 5:21-37

²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²²But 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. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come 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. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If 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. ³⁰And 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. ³¹It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³²But 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.

³³Again, 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.' ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

This morning I am going to preach a "pre-forgiveness sermon" - that is, a sermon I am going to share where I am engaging in a topic that has riled me dangerously close to outrage, which is not a condition that is known for absolute clarity of thought. It's what happens when religion and science mix, which is what you have before you in a pastor who has a background in civil engineering and physics. So I begin by asking your forgiveness if my outrage exceeds my rationality, which is, of course, possible when much is at stake.

As many of you are aware, our Montana Legislature is presently meeting; this is where representatives from around our state gather to propose, debate, approve or defeat bills presented by their membership. There have been some good bills, but there have also been some bad bills, some really bad bills, some absolutely terrible bills, and some horrible, terrible, no good, very bad bills.

And then there is Senate Bill 235, which sets a new law.

Senate Bill 235 seeks to regulate science curriculum in public school. The legislation's sponsor says that by banning scientific theories, the policy aims to prevent kids from being taught things that aren't true.

The bill is sponsored by freshman Republican Senator Daniel Emrich from Great Falls. In his testimony, Emrich said the bill would make sure students are taught what a scientific fact is.

"If we operate on the assumption that a theory is fact, unfortunately, it leads us to asking questions that may be potentially based on false assumptions," Emrich said.

I actually don't know where to begin in describing just how wrong this bill is - as well as how bad the thinking is behind it.

First of all, how can you know that an assumption is false without asking questions? I think that's how you find out what is false in the first place - you inquire as to its validity; you question.

But secondly, and more importantly, it is not only me but other notable figures such as Stephen Hawking and Albert Einstein and J. Robert Oppenheimer and the majority of accredited scientists living and in the past - no one in the creditable field of science would ever assume theory is fact; in fact, teachers and professors are usually very keen on emphasizing the difference - a theory is "a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained," whereas a fact "a thing that is known or proved to be true." In other words, a theory most often exists to understand facts better; theory is employed to use factual reality in the applications we deem useful to life.

In other words, theories are essential to understanding and using facts. Theories expand the comprehension of fact; theories help bring facts into life. Fact and theory are not the same, but are essential to each other.

Consider how many theories are used in the employment of our factual reality, theories which, if forbidden to be taught, would hinder or eradicate several if not most of the areas deemed essential to human life, or for that matter life in any form; for example:

- Regarding Biology, we would be required to banish teaching Cell Theory; the cognitive, behavioral, psychodynamic, humanistic, biological, socio-cultural, and evolutionary theories of human metabolism and health; germ Theory of

Disease. These provide the foundation for health care - there goes medical advances. Say goodbye to medicine.

- Regarding Chemistry: we would be required to banish the teaching of kinetic theory of gases, valence bond theory, Lewis theory, molecular orbital theory - there goes basic combustion principles and hydrocarbon energy exchange -- say goodbye to your car, or worse; say goodbye to your motorcycle! (can you feel my pain?).
- Regarding Physics: we would be required to banish the teaching of General Relativity; Special Relativity; Coulomb's Law of Electrodynamics; Quantum Field Theory. - there goes the gravitational constant, relative mass indices conducive to planetary gravitational effects - say goodbye to space travel and electrical appliances.
- I could go on and on with things like this - if we didn't teach theory in school, we would remove essential education components like the Big Bang Theory, or Hubble's Theory of Cosmic Expansion, or Kepler's Theories of Planetary Motion, or the Universal Theory of Gravitation; we'd remove Newton's Laws of Motion, the Laws of Thermodynamics, Archimedes' Buoyancy Principle, and the theories of Evolution and Natural Selection. Say goodbye to, well, pretty much everything we take for granted as normal human understanding.

But perhaps the greatest point is this: **Without the theories associated with them, facts cannot be understood, only experienced.** It is a fact that the sun is overhead; it is photovoltaic theory and quantum field theory which tell us what solar energy is, and how it works, and what it contributes to life here on earth and perhaps elsewhere. Facts have to do with what is; theories have to do with what we are to make of what is; they are profoundly interdependent.

So, you ask, what on earth does all of this have to do with Jesus? Everything, as it turns out, for Jesus, in our passage today, is stating the absolute need for facts to be accompanied by theories. Religious facts, that is, accompanied by theoretical grace.

I believe this is an amazingly relevant and helpful way to consider what's going on with Jesus and his teachings to the good people of Palestine 2,000 years ago,

which are teachings sorely needed today. Jesus expounds to the mixed crowd around him all kinds of understandings and laws and ways of living that might be thought of as facts of religious life in that day - do not kill; do not covet; give generously; tell the truth; obey the divorce laws; do not swear. It is the old covenant law, the ten commandments or the dodecalogue, which Jesus refers to. But Jesus does something akin to theoretical in nature here, in that he acknowledges the basic laws described in the covenant, but goes further to relate how to make those laws more consistent with what works for life as God intends it to be. Do not kill, but more to the point, check your anger and hatred of others which spur on the seeds of murder; tune your heart before you shape your actions. Do not covet, but more than that, watch out for any objectification of others; be wary of the lustful eye and the trouble that comes with making the physical the most important thing. Give generously yes, but more importantly given authentically, lovingly, and even sacrificially as well; such giving changes lives, and impacts the world. Tell the truth, but do so especially when it is something you'd rather hide; there is no liberty greater than having to hide nothing.

On and on, Jesus goes beyond what is accepted factual practice towards what involves theoretical grace that brings to life a dead law; it could even be said that Jesus was making the point that it is how we choose to live that matters more than that we live, for a life lived without a sense of purpose or innate value - theoretical quantities more than factual - is a miserable affair. Only as one embraces the "why" of life can one discover the "what" of life conclusively.