

Matthew 5:13-20

Turn on any screen and it will become obvious that we are so divided as a people, a society, a nation. This is nothing new, of course, even from the fall Adam and Eve where taking sides, passing blame, and pointing fingers. And so we continue this trend of taking sides and pointing fingers, shouting, “They are evil, they are wrong, and if anyone other than me had any common sense they would see it!” And then that side shouts back their “whataboutisms,” not being accountable for the evil on their side, but sure pointing out all the evil on the other side.

Into this world of division, Jesus comes to us, Christians (who are gathered from different cliques in high school, to different cultures, countries, and socio-economics – made one in Christ) and he says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Or is right and wrong only dependent on the letter in front of the politician’s name?

Does he say, “Make sure you win the argument no matter what”? Does he say, “Don’t shine for them – they’ve done bad things”? Does he say, “You’ve had trauma so now you are not responsible for your actions anymore”? Does he say, “I don’t care what works are being done, as long as we seem nice and then the Father is glorified”?

No, he says: Let your light shine before others, (real, actual people with sins and flaws), so that they may see your good works (as defined by who? God’s law that is good, not evil) and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. People God loves AND the Law. Jesus holds up **both**.

Now don’t mishear me, healthy boundaries are necessary and good – but when we can’t stand that person we want to cut them out of our lives – but why would you cut people out so that the

light is hidden? No one puts a lamp under a basket! The light is for people to see! Even people you can't stand.

On the other side: Why would we team up or approve or condone evil so that the light mingles with darkness? That can't be. The light needs to be that: true light. The Law of God (right and wrong) is upheld.

In the midst of confusion, juggling, identity, politics, stress, work, pain, anger – Jesus has us hold up these two: People and the Law.

Do you see it? This wonderful gift Jesus gives us today to try and navigate this divisive world? The gift of clarity. And it comes from a tension, or boundaries, to help us navigate this confusing life as a sinner in a sinful world that struggles with distinctions.

Lutheran's like tension, or at least we say we do, in practice perhaps it's less fun to try and balance two things or, as I like to say, drive the center lane between two ditches.

The two ditches, or boundaries, today that can help us get clarity are these: On the one side the sin and error and evil of seeing nothing but the Law and ignoring the people or person who Jesus died for. And on the other side, the sin and error of seeing only the person and ignoring the Law.

Let's start there: Jesus has a few things to say about the Law, no? "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them but fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called "affirming, tolerant, welcoming, and accepting" – excuse me, sorry, "they will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches

them will be called “judgy, and mean, and hateful...” Oh wait forgive me, “Will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

And what are “these commandments” Jesus is talking about? Answer: all the commandments and Law he will give in the rest of his Sermon on the Mount – go read it and buckle up. He takes the ten commandments and turns them up to 11, and pierces into our hearts and minds regarding our lust, our anger, our words...

And in spite of Jesus’ stern words we are taught by the world to relax the commandments of God. “Oh it’s a new day and age, we don’t have to listen to those funny laws from the Bible. God is love!” “Oh Jesus ate with sinners so he is OK with sin!” “He gave free bread and healthcare to all so we don’t need to talk about uncomfortable things like ‘sin’ and just focus on social programs.”

“Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Still in the kingdom, that’s gracious, indeed! But least in the kingdom.

Which means we cannot sacrifice God’s goodness, truth, and Law. There is right and wrong, and God’s Word guides us into it and it is for our good and for society.

And we in a conservative Church, many of us, are probably nodding our heads to this, that’s right!

But just as we cannot forsake the law for the sake of the people, neither can we forsake the people for the sake of the law.

The goodness of God's law shines, and it shines for who? For others. For people. That they, people, might give glory to the Father for his goodness.

An even better image of this is in our Old Testament lesson. The people of God are going through the motions of the law, to the letter, "Greatest in the kingdom?" Doesn't seem like it... "Why is God upset at them, they are doing the law?" They have forgotten about how this law is for the good of the people, not for the good of itself.

You fast, you bow your heads all nice and proper, and yet you oppress, you lay heavy burdens on people, you are wicked. The fast the Lord wants, "is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh." To give of what you have, even if it hurts, for another?

And this is probably where our wheels start spinning in our heads, "But we have to be safe about it, and we need good boundaries, and want to be good stewards, and I have responsibilities to my family in that vocation..." and you know what, you are completely right. All of that is true. We just talked about how we can't sacrifice the Law. But do we use it as an excuse to paralyze our mercy?

And I think if we are honest, we do. "Someone else will help them. Not my problem. They should have thought of that first."

As if we, in times of trial, would not do what we could for our families. As if we had never thought something through before and screwed up. As if we have never needed help. Jesus cares about people. **Real people.**

Is that an excuse to overlook crimes and complain about the consequences of our actions? No.

Jesus cares about the Law. **Real Goodness.**

And he cares so much about both of these things. That he himself, as a real person, a real person, who has come to uphold the law, does so faithfully unto death. He could have looked at us and said, “no that will take too much of my energy, there will be too much trauma, no, they should have thought about the wages of sin before they sinned, no, they that’s not my problem, let them save themselves.” He could have said that.

But we know he did not. He came to real people, he still does, in Word, Sacrament, promises where two or more are gathered. He comes to real people who are lost, lonely, sinful, broken. He comes to people like us who don’t always drive the center lane, too focused on the letter, and our hearts grow cold. To people like us who go too far the other way and compromise truth because of the pressure we face. He comes to real people, even people like us with doubts and fears and sins.

And he came and was beaten and killed by vicious men who were confused and thought they were right and used any law they could to get him killed. He was abandoned by friends and followers who caved to fear and pressure. He hung and died having every right to call on his angels to wipe this earth clean... but stayed, so that they, and you, and you, real people, and that person at the shelter, and that person a half a world away, might rejoice in his light and goodness. That we might be set free from the burdens of this broken confusing world. And that He might be our Savior who will bring us into every good.

So if you are going through the motions, look to the cross and see what Christ, real God in the flesh, has done for you and the world. When you are tempted to compromise, look to the cross, why did he have to die if nothing is wrong? No there is right and wrong and payment has been made. And when the injustice out there and lawlessness scandalizes you, or if you look in and you feel fearful look to the empty tomb and see that it will be made right.

People and the Law. May we hold them up.

May we rejoice that Jesus held them up for us all. May we rejoice that he died and rose to fulfill it all and bring life to the world, even people like us.

Amen.