

Prescriptive Piety
Matthew 5: 21-48

In this time of uncertainty in our world: moral mishaps on the public stage, an increase of unchecked illnesses, and global insecurity, civil uprisings and war – it is comforting to know that there are some people who have it all figured out. You know the ones. They just know without doing anything. We're left to wonder if God has given this tiny handful of folks innate qualities that obviate the need for any sort of advance work before they're certain: certain to win no matter how difficult the challenge, certain of the answer to any lingering question, certain of the outcome even before beginning any task. It's as if they have some special role to play that catapults their perspectives well beyond the realm of a commoner's understanding so that they are sure to find themselves (or put themselves) into a grand place of glory regardless of the setting or the company.

These are the ones who are “sometimes right; always certain.”

They're the high rolling business people who demand compensation at a multiple of the average employee's. They're the pretentious politicians who determine that only they know what's in the best interest of illegal immigrants stuck in urban squalor. They're the wives or husbands who condescend to their spouse's point of view regardless of his or her widely known expertise on a subject. They're the parents who coach the coaches into starting their Little Johnny in spite of his obvious lack of training.

This profile isn't only found in secular settings. As a matter of fact, we find it too often in the church. Moralistic preachers and church members filled with self-righteous indignation tote lists of "Christian teachings" and seem to lord it over the rest of us who don't quite seem to measure up – in their opinion, or maybe even our own. In Sunday morning sermons or televised tent meetings, a kind of absolutism is finding its way into our conversations. This moral absolutism can challenge one's focus from the heart-rending inspiration of our Lord and move even a thoughtful Christian toward a legalistic attitude toward life that equates righteousness with visible compliance to a code of conduct.

It's a kind of black and white way to live out what we profess to believe - in the midst of so much grey. It's a cookie cutter approach to making everyday decisions, justified by what's brightly colored red in the Word of God.

A certain level moral absolutism presents a check on reality that makes our lives easier. We know from plenty of research that the fastest growing churches are those that offer a kind of check-list Christianity. For we who prefer not to live in the ambiguity of what we might do to fulfill Christ's vision for us now and into eternity, it's just what we want to hear. A guaranteed dose of prescriptive piety, I'll call it, is what encourages us to walk into church, hear a to-do list for living, and leave either justified that we've gotten high marks for the week before or emboldened since we've got some new things to try that very afternoon.

Some of you know that I'm a *Private Practice* junkie. *Private Practice* is the Thursday night medical drama that spun off of *Grey's Anatomy* a few years ago. For some,

Private Practice is just one more prime time fashion show. For me, *Private Practice* is the one show I watch each week that can make everything else fall into place. I know that might sound ridiculous, but even this last Thursday, *Private Practice* did not let me down.

Private Practice revolves around the lives of several medical doctors who've set up a comprehensive wellness practice in Santa Monica, CA. They do their surgery at a local hospital, where one of their colleagues, Dr. Charlotte King, is the Chief of Staff. Last week, we were reminded that Charlotte King had reason to seek what is morally absolute in what had become her very frightening world. She'd been the victim of a brutal attack by a man who was now in her hospital, months later, lying in the ER with a knife lodged in his stomach. The team of doctors attending him want to do what's right, all the way around. They want to help their friend, Charlotte, deal with her pain; and they want to help even the injured brutalizer come out alive. In an impassioned conversation about this dilemma between the doctors, Charlotte said, "When I was a little girl, I used to go to church every Sunday with my daddy. I'd sit on his lap and daydream through most of it. But what caught my attention week in and week out was the pastor's sermon. Now, he'd bang on about this or that but it always came back to one thing. Good and evil: it scared me. But there was something comforting about it, how black and white it seemed."

Yes, there **is** a scary, growing level of uncertainty in the world. Our financial system's been shaky for a while. For several of us here, the real estate market is making us sick. Once stalwart members of Congress - and the clergy - have been proven to be flawed beyond anyone's imaginings. Even the environment is lending us pause...(reference the

nearly five feet of snow we've seen in the last two months). Technologically sophisticated communications systems enable and embolden uprisings. Technologically sophisticated communications systems bring uprisings and other upsetting news painfully close. Not sure what to do with all of this pressing, sometimes upsetting, occasionally suspect information, we can begin to fear.

And fear leads us all to want answers - absolute answers about life. We **want** a prescription for our piety because there's something comforting about it. This could be one reason why some of the evangelical churches are growing by leaps and bounds. In a world filled with ambiguity, the church can be a place where you don't have to wonder, you don't have to think at all about what is right. The good book or the one sharing it with you will tell you everything you need to know. Yes, right there in red. So when we come across a text like this morning's, we take comfort that there's no doubt what we should or should not do. Come to terms quickly...don't be angry. Accept only one justifiable reason for divorce. Don't swear (and I'm not talking about curse words). Give someone your cloak when he asks for your coat. (What's the difference between a cloak and a coat, anyway?) Go the extra mile... Love your enemies...Be perfect.

Eugene Petersen, a Presbyterian Pastor and author of the bible commentary, *The Message*, would say that a Godly message isn't necessarily about what God has done, or is doing, or will do, which in turn might translate into what **we'd better** do or can do or shouldn't do. And a good Christian message doesn't relay a list of "shoulds" based on what Jesus did or said in scripture. When we listen for a message that offers a to-do list – a

prescription for our piety – Petersen warns that we’re listening for something that’s about **us** and not something that’s about the good news of Jesus Christ. When we’re listening for a to-do list, we’re listening for a message that can become an evaluative tool for us to use to gauge how well we’re doing in this world, or what **more** we need to do, think, or feel in order to reach our goal (whatever we define our goal to be, or whatever we glean from scripture our goal **should** be).

Petersen suggests that a Godly message is more about *who God is being* in our lives in order to motivate our world one person at a time. In other words, a good Christian message tells us something about the good news of Jesus Christ, alive in the world – going on in the world - today. A good Christian message is a proclamation from God of what God is **being** in our lives in a way that’s **never been before**. In your particular context, in your particular life journey, where you are right now, who is God in you?

When you hear Jesus telling us to tear out your eye if it might cause you to look a particular way at someone other than your spouse, cut off your hand if it causes you to sin, turn the other cheek if someone strikes you across the face and allow him to hit you there, too, what is the living message for you today? Because you’re really not going to pluck out your eye. And you’re really not going to cut off your hand. And you’re not really going to stick out your face for one more sock, are you? It might be helpful to note what Reggie Joiner, co-founder of the now mega-church, North Point, in Alpharetta, GA, says, “*All scripture is equally inspired, but not all scripture is equally applicable.*”

So while God inspired certain verses to be passed down from generation to generation, God hopes for each of us to discern from those possibly less applicable passages a core message that will carry us through fearful, difficult or simply **changing** times. Then, when we read texts like the ones we read today, we will read with a heart and mind for the foundational truth that Jesus Christ is hoping that we hear. We will listen for how God is calling us to think or feel in our everyday life, in this particular journey of our lifetime, where we are now. We will discern for ourselves the essential message that Jesus Christ has for our lives. And as we listen to the reading of God's most holy word, we will listen to our hearts for who God is in our lives in a way God has never been for us before. This sort of thoughtful listening and responding is what turns an ancient, dusty set of laws into a living, breathing word from God, moving intensely and intently in this world, motivating lives toward a perfect kingdom reflective of Christ's movement in this world for all time.

Now, there are a lot of us who come to church each Sunday morning, just like there are tens of thousands of us around the world every day who are looking for a kind of pastoral prescription for our lives. We want a better idea of just what we need to do to make this sometimes fearful world a better place. We want a better idea of just what we need to do to insure our place in the better place to come. I don't deny that the idea of a check-list for Christian practices isn't alluring. But I want to impress upon us all that as alluring an idea as this might seem, it's also a potentially dangerous one that can lead to a lot of thoughtless choices and judgmentalism that is less than constructive. Yes, it can be

downright dangerous if we pluck from the Bible sayings or instruction out of context or without regard for the essential teaching underlying that Scripture lesson.

Of the many truths of our faith tradition, one important truth I've found about being a Presbyterian is that it's a rare day when one offers you a fail-safe prescription for your life. It's a rare day when a faithful Presbyterian will tell you precisely what to "do" in order to achieve a sanctified life with Christ. Now, we might tell you what **we** believe **you must eventually believe**, based on what scripture tells us to believe in order to experience eternal life with Christ, but we aren't going to tell you exactly what to do to get there. As a matter of fact, when we are confronted by a list of must dos, most of us shrink away. When it's all said and done, maybe that's the freeing truth about our denomination: God knows whom God saves. Our job is to encourage one another as thoughtful Christians to listen to and read God's holy word, discern for ourselves what it means for us today, translate that meaning into our daily living, and have faith that God has worked everything else out. It's our job to encourage one another as faithful, thoughtful Christians to continually reform our lives to a way that's reflective of the life of Christ in us. It's our job to move from legalism to discernment, based on the core of who Christ is.

So this leads me to the one thing I think you should know coming out of our scripture lesson this morning. Of this I am certain: The core of who Jesus is –the essential foundation of all that he teaches - is love. Jesus gives us a baseline for moral certitude – that's fine, and in this particular section of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes on to tell us that legalism is never enough. He ladders up the law, but each rung is filled with love.

If you'll switch back with me...in the closing scene of last week's *Private Practice*, Charlotte was standing in her brutalizer's dimly lit hospital room when he opened his eyes. As he focused in on her face, she approached him with her characteristic set jaw, feet soon firmly planted beside his bed. She explained why he'd been handcuffed to his bed. Then she got right into his face to give him a piece of her mind. She told him that she'd spent a lot of time building him into a big, bad monster. She said, "If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now, but the truth is, you're nothing but a sad little man. You've got no power over me. I forgive you."

Jesus tells us that to win the battle of our tainted world, we need to move **beyond** a checklist for perfect behavior. Jesus tells us that we need to remember to love: to respond in love, to respond out of love, to initiate in love and to rest in love. Perfect love triumphs over those who are "sometimes right; always certain." Perfect love triumphs over prescriptive piety. Perfect love casts out fear.

Thanks be to God.

