

## **“The Heart of the Matter”**

Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-37 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that your compassion might always be the lens that brings your gospel into focus. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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You probably don't spend a lot of time reading the slides on the electronic sign we have out on Massachusetts. But some of you follow the church on Instagram or Facebook. So you may have noticed our “WE BELIEVE” campaign, which began on the sign in early 2020 and expanded into our social media in the last few months. While it's always a dicey business for Disciples to state that “we” believe any one specific thing, the idea is that there are things that broadly characterize us as a congregation, some of which distinguish us from many of our neighboring churches, and that if we share these truths with our neighbors, the ones of them who need a church like this can more easily find us.

The rest of the sentence that begins “WE BELIEVE” changes every two weeks or so, and the endings cover a wide swath of topics from welcome to justice and even the hope that God has a sense of humor. The one that is pertinent to our readings today says “WE BELIEVE that scripture is too important to take literally.” Now, this sentence was designed very carefully. We wanted to communicate how central scripture is in the life of our congregation, but we also wanted to make clear that we don't relate to it the way a lot of Christians do, which is, sadly, also the way many non-Christians

assume all Christians read scripture. Given the recent Facebook commentary on the post with this particular message, the idea that scripture can be approached with a non-literal interpretation seems to shock and upset some folks. But in light of today's readings, I find it quite comforting. I feel sorry for people trapped in the cage of literalism, trying to find their way out of a contradictory mess of presumed condemnation. I give thanks that I have been taught more fruitful methods for engaging with scripture and that Disciples have a long tradition of relating to the Bible in expansive and life-giving ways.

The Jesus that you would meet if you were to read these verses we just heard from Matthew 5 with a superficial, literalist lens is what we might call "preachy" Jesus. I don't love that the word "preachy" has the connotations that it does, but there it is. This is the Jesus people invoke when they want to judge and condemn other people who they see as not living up to the exacting moral standards they should be. What complicates that narrative is some of the other versions of Jesus we see in the gospels, like the One who says that the one without sin should cast the first stone. Or the One who tells us to be merciful as God is merciful. Or the One who feeds Peter on the beach after the triple betrayal he committed.

Is it possible that typos could be an instrument of the Holy Spirit? Why not, I say? When I was typing up this scripture last night, twice when I was supposed to type the word "hell" my fingers instead gave me "heal." There is Something that wants us to go deeper. We could get deep in the weeds, fighting the battle on literalist terms to find

a way to avoid condemning those whose marriages have not turned out as intended or those whose family's brokenness seems unlikely to ever be reconciled. Or we could reject the literalist terms of engagement altogether and go deeper.

When Jesus says, "you've heard this, but I'm saying this," what is he doing? We must be careful here, or we can easily fall into the trap of supersessionism, a line of interpretation that indulges in antisemitism by insisting that Jesus founded Christianity by bringing a grace that replaces or supersedes the Jewish law. While it is true that Christian tradition decided early on that the finer points of Jewish law would not apply to Christians, it is imperative that we look back at verse 17, where Jesus declares, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

Jesus is not saying the rules don't matter in this series of comparative teachings. He's telling us to go deeper. The rules are not the end point; they are designed to influence our behavior so that our hearts can be transformed. In some ways, the question here is whether our faith is oriented toward humans and our human constructs of right and wrong or whether it's actually about a relationship with God, who sees what's going on in our hearts. The verses about reconciliation are a perfect example. Coming to bring your offering to the altar is something that gives the appearance of faithfulness. Others might see you and be impressed with your generosity. But God, who is supposedly the recipient of that gift, can see what's really going on. And if our hearts are twisted up with grudges and anger, God knows. If we are holding onto

resentment or if we've treated someone badly or cheated someone, God sees our gift and knows that it's not about generosity but about trying to cover over our brokenness and sin. Go deeper, Jesus says, because that's where God is. Not in the appearances your actions portray, but in your heart from which your actions arise.

We don't have to engage in arguments that insist Christianity has replaced Judaism to recognize that Christians and Jews have approached this practice of transformation differently. The law is central to Judaism in a way it simply is not in Christianity. And that's okay. We can still learn from how they did it. Psalm 119 is a great tool for this. You've probably learned before, even if you'd since forgotten, that Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible. But did you know that it has a word for God's law in every single verse? Pull out your Bibles and look with me. It's on page 566. You can raise your hand when we hit those words, if you want to.

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the *law* of the Lord.

Happy are those who keep his *decrees*, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his *ways*.

You have commanded your *precepts* to be kept diligently.

O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your *statutes*.

Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your *commandments*.

I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous *ordinances*.

I will observe your *statutes*; do not utterly forsake me.

Now, one could assume that going on and on like this for 176 verses is just going to create an obsession with “the rules” as an idol. But I think that would be a disservice to the spiritual formation of the poet or poets who wrote these verses. The perseverance of this psalm suggests to me an overwhelming desire to know God through God’s law, in ways that are deeper than just being able to recite them. Hebrew scriptures refer frequently to holding the law in our hearts, which is the aim of these verses. You see it laid out in verses 2-3: Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways. “Seek him with their whole heart” and “also do no wrong.” It’s about our behavior and the state of our hearts. Not in contrast to one another, but in concert.

In this same way, our very approach to scripture needs to go deeper. It’s not about reciting the words or using them as weapons to judge others. It’s about sinking into them, looking at them in the broader context of the gospel, using the underlying truths of God’s mercy and compassion as a lens to show us the deeper meaning of any given passage. And what’s beautiful about that is that when we do, we discover just how life-giving and liberating scripture can be. That’s good news that worthy of sharing, on an electronic sign and on social media, but also with our behavior out in the world and in conversations with family and friends. Let us give thanks for the Living Word that makes us new! Hallelujah and Amen!