



“Attitude Adjustment”

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Hayward, California***

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Matt. 5:1–12 (NRSV)***

I don't know how things work in your family, but in my family, grandchildren can get away with things that others cannot. When my sister and I were young, if we touched the glass on our mother's china closet and left noticeable fingerprints, we would get scolded. By comparison, when my nieces were toddlers and preschoolers and they touched mother's china cabinet and left fingerprints, my mother smiled and laughed and talked about how cute they were. Sometimes she even resisted wiping off their finger prints, because, she said, they reminded her of the girls.

A couple of years ago, sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas, word came from my sister that Mother was in a bad mood about a “laundry list” of issues: the weather had turned cold, her arthritis had flared up, she wasn't looking forward to the 10-hour drive for the holidays, the light bill had gone up again, she didn't know what to get anyone for Christmas, etc. No one seemed to be able to cheer up Mother. That was until my oldest niece phoned Mother and told her point-blank what needed to be said: “Grandma, you need an attitude adjustment!”

Susie went on to explain to her grandmother that while she was sorry about the weather and all those things that were troubling her, that Grandma was very blessed and that she needed to focus on the positives, and look to the future.

The shocking thing to all of us was that Mother took Susie's advice. After Susie lined out the things that Mother ought to be grateful for and should be looking forward to, Mother replied rather matter-of-factly, “Yeah, I guess you're right.”

When this dialogue was recounted to my sister and me, we were stunned. On the one hand, we were amazed that Susie was able to change Mother's tune with one declarative sentence, and on the other hand, we knew that if we had tried that line, we would have had our heads handed to us.

Susie clearly has a special gift for dealing with her grandmother, and for teaching about and adjusting attitudes. According to Matthew, Jesus had this gift too. The gospel reading today, which is commonly known as “The Beatitudes,” was Jesus'

quintessential way of telling his followers, “You need an attitude adjustment!” You need to focus on your blessings and on the future, and leave your negative energy behind.

II

It’s helpful to know that most New Testament scholars think that the author of Matthew’s gospel was a Jewish Christian who collected and kept alive stories about Jesus’ life and ministry for a Jewish Christian audience.

Matthew’s identity and audience influenced the way that he framed his gospel. For example, Mathew illustrated connections between Jesus’ life and ministry and earlier Jewish leaders and their sacred scriptures, because, for Matthew, Jesus was the new Moses.

In Matthew’s view, Jesus’ life reflected both the life of Moses as described in Exodus and the fulfillment of the prophet’s vision in the Hebrew Scriptures. These are some illustrations of Matthew’s perspective:

Matthew’s gospel opens with the genealogy of Jesus which explains that he is the Son of David, and like Moses, linked to the Jewish patriarchs.

As infants, both were considered a threat and were threatened by their nations’ rulers—Moses by Pharaoh and Jesus by Herod.

Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness lasted 40 days and 40 nights—a length of time that echoed the 40 years that Moses and the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness.

In today’s gospel, Jesus gives his followers the Beatitudes on a mountain much like Moses who gave the Hebrew people the Ten Commandments on Sinai and Horeb.¹

Note, too, that there are—count them—Ten Commandments and Ten Beatitudes.

III

While Matthew presents these several similarities between Moses and Jesus—most likely as a means of bolstering Jesus’ authority—the way that the Beatitudes are framed in Matthew is more significant in explaining who Jesus is than the parallels that Matthew draws between Jesus and Moses. This is because the way that the Beatitudes are framed reflects a shift in ethical methodology from Moses’ time to Jesus’ time. This shift is from an orientation toward rules to a focus on goals. It is

¹ See Ex. 20:2–17, and Deut. 5:6–21 for a complete listing of the Ten Commandments.

also a shift that we might call an attitude adjustment—a shift from the negative to the positive.

Rather than saying, “Don’t do this, that, and eight other things”—as Moses recounts in the Ten Commandments, Jesus orients his followers toward the future—toward a vision of the way the world should be, and blesses those whose very being and behavior point toward the future that God intends for all of us.

Think about the Ten Commandments for a moment. All but one of the ten includes the phrase, “Thou shalt not . . .” I tend to think of the Ten Commandments as the “Ten No-No’s.” The Ten Commandments offer important rules to live by. But they tend to focus on negative behavior and defining what is wrong as opposed to painting a picture of positive behavior and helping us imagine what life could be like if we made better choices.

The Beatitudes reorient us by shifting the focus from the negative and the past to the positive and the future. The Beatitudes also turn the focus from narrowly considering our own actions to awareness of attributes in ourselves and others that if emulated would bring heaven on earth.

Jesus reorients his audience by talking about blessings and the future. He blesses the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, the persecuted, and the condemned. And he invites us to do the same.

IV

No doubt, some are wondering, “Is the preacher going to say that the Ten Commandments are passé, and that they can be ignored?”

No. Neither Jesus nor I are proposing that we shelve the Ten Commandments. Instead, I’m proposing that with the Beatitudes Jesus offered his followers more tools for moral decision making and living—tools that focused on his vision for the world, not just on ancient laws.

Laws (like the Ten Commandments) have their place in any society. They help us create and maintain order. But to fulfill Christ’s vision we need to be and behave in ways that help us live into that vision, and we need spiritual encouragement to claim our identity and work for the common good—even when who we are and what we’re about is rejected by the dominant culture. This vision and encouragement is what Jesus offered his followers in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus’ gift of a vision, and the principles and behaviors that would help us live into that vision, are helpful, but often it’s even more helpful to have up-close and personal examples of what the Beatitudes look like in practice. One example that

many of us in this congregation have been privy to is the example set by our own Cal Rule.

V

Cal died on January 13, 2011, just a few months before his 102nd birthday. Over the course of his almost fifty-nine years at Eden, he served in numerous roles as an officer and Trustee of Eden Church. If Cal were alive and sitting in the pews today, he would be beside himself listening to me speak about him in laudatory terms. So I'll be brief out of respect for his deep sense of humility.

Like so many who made this church great, a job well done, for Cal, was its own reward. He didn't expect recognition; in fact, he dodged it. Most of the contributions that Cal and his contemporaries made to Eden are only kept alive in oral tradition and in our memories. Cal and his pals figured out what the right thing was to do, and they just did it. In their view, they weren't making history when they founded the Hayward Chapter of the Salvation Army and Eden Housing, or brought a state university to our community. They were simply doing the right thing.

Cal was a true servant leader both as a family man and as a community leader. He was the third of five children, and outlived his parents and four sisters and took care of all of them in their old age. He was a member and leader in the Hayward Lions Club and Masonic lodge, and the Castro Valley Rotary Club.

There was no job too large or too small that Cal would not accept if asked to serve by a nominating committee, a family member, or friend. Often he simply saw the need and quietly stepped up to the plate.

I remember when I was new to Eden seeing some photo albums of the parsonage demolition. There were photos of Cal Rule, Bob Petersen, John Schaap, Bob Sorensen, Jim Schuman, and others working on the landscape. There was Cal with a shovel in one photo and a rake in another pitching in. He was at least 90 years old at the time.

A few years later, I hosted a dinner party at my house and invited Cal and Shirley and a number of their friends. Shirley wasn't able to join us, so Cal came by himself. He was the consummate gentleman. He brought the perfect wine to pair with the main entre. He sent a beautiful thank you note after the event. As I was clearing the table from dinner, Cal asked me if he could wash the dishes. I nearly fell over. I had never had an offer like that from any man of his generation. Cal was 95 or so at that time, and he offered more than once. I couldn't bring myself to accept, but I will never forget his willingness to help.

Cal was treasurer of the church several decades ago when Pioneer Chapel was renovated. The congregation paid for the cost of renovations by selling "junk bonds" to the membership. (I don't know if that revenue model was one that he brought from

the bank or not, but it certainly could have been.) A number of people bought the junk bonds, and saved the church lots of money. Some lenders asked to be paid interest. Some didn't. Others even forgave the loans.

A few years ago, I was contacted by the executor of someone's estate asking for repayment of such a loan to the church. Because Cal kept such neat and accurate records, I was able to demonstrate to the executor that the loan to the church had been paid in full with interest, and I was able to tell the executor the exact date, the check number, and the amount repaid to the lender.

At 101 and as an Eden Church member for close to 59 years, Cal and I attended a lot of memorial services together. He was frequently asked to speak at them. In fact, Cal has spoken at more memorials since I've been at Eden Church than anyone else except yours truly. Once I even remember a family calling and asking if they could rent Pioneer Chapel for their father's funeral. I said, "Sure. We would be happy to welcome you to our campus. Do you need a pastor?" I asked. The children said, "No, thank you, we have Cal Rule."

Out of respect for Cal's sense of humility, I will stop there, and invite you to pick up the words of remembrance that I prepared with the help of his daughter Wendy. Copies are available on the counter in the church office.

I'll close with this thought: Cal was a man whose attitude was immutably grounded in gratitude. He lived a life that exemplified the attributes that Jesus blessed, and he behaved in a way that brought us closer to the more just, equitable, and peaceful world that Jesus imagined—a world in which heaven comes on earth. And so for his life and witness, we will be forever grateful. Amen.