

Sermon on the Mount Iv - the Reign of Abba's Love

by Michael Flowers

The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a life that reflects God's character and values, through repentance, replacement, and cruciformity.

Duration: 26:44

Scripture: Leviticus 19:2, Matthew 5:9-48

Topics: "Love"

Description

In this sermon, Bishop Stuart shares about the importance of deep conversion and being fully alive in Christ. He references a story shared by his wife, Catherine, about her mother disarming a robber by responding in love and addressing the root cause of his actions. Bishop Stuart emphasizes the need to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, just as God does. He also explains that Lent is not just about giving up chocolate, but about reflecting on and dealing with our disordered passions in order to align ourselves with Christ. Overall, the sermon encourages listeners to seek deep conversion and allow Jesus to reign over their emotions and reactions.

Transcript

We're going to call this talk today, The Reign of Abba's Love. Next Sunday will be the last Sunday of Epiphany, whereby the lectionary readings aim at revealing places in our lives in need of repentance. What we're entering into is a season of 40 days of prayer and fasting.

It's called the season of Lent in preparation, not only for Easter. That's the big idea, Lent is preparation for Easter. What does that mean? It's that as we go through Epiphany and we are confronted with the words of Jesus, especially these radical words, all of his words are radical words, he goes right to the root and exposes so much that we can grow up into and live into.

He encourages us by giving a biography of himself, really the Sermon on the Mount is about him and how he will fulfill these words, right on the cross, you know. And then he invites us to become cruciform with him. And that is a process of all of our lives, just day to day, year after year, becoming more submitted, so grounded and rooted in him.

And so it's a life's journey. And so we take out of the year 40 days, every year, to do some inventory. And we go, wow, you know, this and this and this need to come into better alignment with him.

And so, left unmaintained, we fall apart. Word and sacrament, and then responding, as it were, to that word and sacrament. It's a relationship with Christ.

And so, as you begin to make preparations for the Lenten journey, considering what to crucify, or another word for that Paul uses is put off, right? It says put off this and put this on. It's a baptismal language, really. As you're considering, and you know, you need to go into Lent thinking now, and preparing like, okay, what kind of journey, Lord, are you calling me to, as I go into the desert with you? Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the desert, and he experienced the same thing for us.

And so, considering what to crucify or put off among the range of disordered passions addressed last week, and what to intensify or put on. Let me say that word. What you want to intensify in your life, or invite into your life, for example, acts of mercy, compassion, generosity, more attentiveness in prayer, and things like this, right? I can use all of that.

Let the Sermon on the Mount provide a Lenten template, whereby we ask, we seek, we knock. That's what Lent is about. It's a period where we intensify our asking, our seeking, and our knocking to be more like Jesus, to be more Christ-like.

And this is the goal in mind today in all the readings, in all the readings. Our Old Testament reading, Leviticus 19, calls us to be holy. Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, you shall be holy.

You shall be holy. Why? Because the Lord is holy. That's why.

We shall be holy. Why? Because the Lord is holy. The Lord is calling us to be God-like, Godly.

What does it mean to be holy? What does that word mean? You can boil it down to be set apart for something. It's just setting something aside, setting something apart to make holy, for God's holy purposes. And we are a people who have been set apart within the part of the whole to be used for God's purposes in the earth, right? To be set apart for the good of the whole as well.

The reconciliation of all things. Exhibiting the gospel of reconciliation. We're hearing in the gospel read today.

To see God within God's people. To see God within God's people as the salt of the earth, the life of the world, the temple of the Holy Spirit, as we heard in our New Testament reading today. Jesus, in today's gospel, Matthew 5, verse 39 and following, and then he ends up that chapter, is grounding his teaching in Leviticus 19.

That's where all of that's coming from. What does holiness look like? Our Old Testament reading spelled it out. It addresses how a nation, a community, would live as God's holy people, ending, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And there's a lot of details before it gets to that of how you love your neighbor as yourself. You shall leave some of the fruit of your vines for those who are poor and for the refugees and the aliens and the sojourner and so on and so forth. God cares about the nations of the world.

The problem is the interpretation of neighbor, which Jesus cuts right into, right? Which Israel came to see as their fellow Israelites, really only. Exhibiting great disdain for the Gentiles, all of us, all the nations of the earth, right? And this is relevant to Jesus' hearers who are under Roman occupation, Gentile occupation. He's telling them to love those Roman soldiers who are making them go a mile.

And that was the law. They could actually command them to go a mile. And he's saying, go to.

Go to. And so the breaking of this nationalistic pride, because the blessing of Abraham is not about the Jewish nation. You're blessed to be a blessing to the whole world.

And this is what they always struggled with. And that's what we struggle with. I think that's what the church struggles with.

It's really, you know, the covenant of Abraham is really the Great Commission. There's not much difference. It's a go.

Go into all the world and disciple the nations, disciple the nations. It's people who are different than you, who have different food and ethnicities and all this difference. Be Jesus to them.

Bring Jesus to them. And perhaps when you get there, you'll find out that Jesus was already there. The breaking of this nationalistic pride would be necessary to obey the last words of Jesus.

Go into all the world, which that word there is ethnos, all the nations, and make disciples. As followers of Jesus, we must forgive those who offend or injure us. And to keep short accounts through confession of sin, monitoring the inner dragons.

We have these inner dragons that roar up and blow smoke out of our mouths sometimes. Do you know how to barbecue things? And so we're called to love without distinction in this passage today, whether friends or enemies. T.K. Chesterton says, we are commanded to love our neighbors and our enemies.

They are generally the same people. Jesus is addressing issues of the deep heart by preparing his disciples for how to overcome evil with good. But we just intuit more easily tit for tat.

We just intuit that. I mean, it's a knee jerk reaction, really. You raise your voice at me, I'll raise my voice back.

You do violence to me and I return the favor. And it's because of our own fears, our own insecurities and our own unresolved conflicts. I know these things because this is what I deal with.

They're so easily tapped by another person. And some people, those things, those insecurities and those fears and those unresolved conflicts are just right there, just waiting. That's the inner dragon.

It's just waiting to go. You know, you tapped it. You know, it's kind of like you made me angry.

Nobody can make you angry. Take responsibility for that. It's your anger, not the person who, quote, makes you angry, right? That's a cop out, man.

When you say that, you made me angry, right? I must take responsibility for my anger before I can deal with it. And I've, you know, that's been one of those, I think, inner dragons for me since I can remember as a teenager, at least. It's being kind of, it's all right there.

I'm very touchy-feely and, man, I'm super sensitive and a fire can get lit very easily if that doesn't come under the dominion of Jesus. It doesn't come under the reign of Abba's love, what we're talking about today. And so that's why James says, you know, be quick, be quick to listen.

Be slow to speak and slow to anger. Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. But Jesus is saying that we must experience deep conversion, whereby our old internal buttons are not set off.

Retaliation, reaction, vindication, all must come under the reign of Abba's love. The opposite spirit, which is the Holy Spirit. You ever heard somebody say, you just need to learn how to move in the opposite spirit.

Easier said than done, right? In the heat of the battle, that is. But that opposite spirit really is the Holy Spirit. It's not an attitude as much as it is a person developing his attitudes in us.

And it must replace the indwelling of this Holy Spirit within us, making us a temple. The Holy Spirit comes to make us holy by replacing the unbridled passions that are unruly in our life. We would call that sanctification, right? Growing in Christ's likeness.

Now, this is why we're reflecting on these passages before Lent. Lent is a season of repentance and replacement. I like those two go together.

Repentance and replacement. Putting off, putting on. Just don't empty the glass.

Pour something into it, you know. You don't want to be an empty glass. Because there's plenty of things out there that will feel like empty glass.

And so, he emptied himself, Jesus did. And was anointed by the Holy Spirit. And was sent right into a time of Lent himself.

A time of fasting for 40 days and nights. And just contending with those inner voices. And so, Lent is a season of repentance and replacement.

A time to reflect. A time to go with Christ into the desert and deal with specific disordered passions. Which need to be nailed to the cross of Christ.

Well, I thought it was just giving up chocolate. I'm sorry, that's not what Lent's about. It's to deal with your disordered passions.

This is the way the desert fathers saw it in the 4th century. They went out into the desert to deal with those passions that we all. They're universal passions.

They're disordered. It's that fallen self of ours. And so, we need these seasons of repentance and replacement to deal with that.

We don't go alone. We go, the Holy Spirit sent Jesus into the desert. And we go with the Holy Spirit.

So, when Jesus says in verse 43, you have heard it said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. I think I can do that. But I say to you, love your enemies.

And here's how to do it. Here's step number one. Pray for them.

You won't be able to do that first injunction, love your enemies, unless you can go first and begin to pray for them. And you may just be clawing and resisting and resenting even the name of the person, perhaps. That you might have bitterness.

You might have a root of bitterness so deep in your life. Until you tap it in prayer and you begin to cast it out through blessing. Then it will remain painful in your life.

This is for the good of the body. Because that root of bitterness defiles the man. It just speaks and reproduces itself.

That's not what we want reproduced in our lives. And so, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This is a context where he's preparing them for battle, for rejection, for martyrdom.

And to be a witness comes from that word, martyr. The word for be a witness for Christ, it's the word for martyr. That's the good news.

No, I'm sorry. Are we encouraged yet? No, I'm sorry. We're going to hear a lot about the cross of Christ during Lent.

And Jesus is preparing us for that. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. So that you may be sons and daughters of your Father, who is in heaven.

He's saying that reciprocal love is much easier. I love you, you love me. That's much easier than all manner of evil being extinguished by Abba's love.

There's no love in return coming back. It stops evil in its tracks if you don't respond to evil with evil. We overcome evil with good, Paul says in Romans 12.

This is counterintuitive to our fallen selves. This is why we need Lent every year. This is why we confess our sins every Sunday.

And really every day. I use that confessional every day. Your priest really needs it.

As long as we're responding back tit for tat, we're replicating evil. We're multiplying it. It lives on.

But when it stops here, it can't live anymore. You have heard it said that an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil.

But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek. If you get slapped on the right... I'm sorry. I thought that was there.

There we go. Yeah. That was sermon illustration number one.

But if you get slapped on the right cheek by a person slapping you, that means that they're slapping you with the back of their hand, which in this culture was the ultimate insult. It wasn't just an act of violence, but it was also an act of shaming because it's the backhand slap. And these are just illustrations that Jesus is giving.

There's so many other ways that these are just three little illustrations of what he's trying to get at. It's the spirit of it. It's get retaliation out of your system.

Learn how not to react, but respond in love. This is conversion. This is conversion.

This is why we need Lent. You have heard it said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his Son to rise.

This is what the Father's like, right? He makes his Son to rise on the evil and on the good. God's generous, Jesus is saying. The Father has no conflict in blessing all people.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same. And if you greet only your brothers, your fellow Jews or your fellow Christians, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles, those who are un-Jewish, do the same. You, therefore, must be perfect.

You see now the context of perfection? This is the context. He just illustrated it. And so he's not talking about some sinless perfection here, even though that is the goal in our sanctification and our deification when we are all changed in a twinkling of an eye to be married to Jesus.

That's the goal. There's a lot of transformation between this day and that day. And you, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Anybody tracking with Bishop Stewart's sermons that I sent out a link about, it's called Fully Alive, the series is. Series number three, his wife shares on what it means to be a woman. Catherine was raised on the mission field in Brazil, and she's describing an episode with her mother on the way to the market one day.

She says mother's walking with her grocery bags, and she's on the way to the market, and she gets held up by a robber. And the guy says, give me your money. And she just walks up to him and puts her hand on his shoulder and says, in the name of Jesus, don't do this.

What's causing you to do this? And she just disarmed the guy right there, right? In the name of Jesus, don't do this. What's caused you to do this? Why do you need my money? I don't have it. And he says, well, I lost my job and I've got kids and I've got mouths to feed.

And he just goes in and she starts to interview him. And they get in the conversation and she says, well, what are your skills? I'm a baker. Have you tried this over here? Have you gone here? And she says, well, go with me to the market and I will give you money, but you will not take it from me.

He puts his arm around her and they go to the market. And that's very common in Brazilian culture because it's matriarchal and mother's everything. So sons don't move away from their mothers in a Brazilian culture.

She knows that. He spent some time in Brazil, but he's back in children's church. She's got him wrapped around her finger through honor and respect.

They're walking through the market and the people who know her are going like, do you need help? No, no, no. We're fine. We're fine.

And so she gets some money. She gives it to him. And then she says, well, here's a church you need to go to.

And this is where you need to go. And here's my phone number. I want you to follow up with what I'm telling you and call me.

And so she walks away and he's following her. And she turns around, says, what do you want? And he says, can I go now? That's what it means to be Christlike. Make me like Catherine's mother.

That'll be good enough. And she says, can you imagine if a dude was in place of my mother? What would have happened? Oh, my gosh. I don't have to comment on that, right? But we're created in the image of God, male and female.

And I need that part of God's image rising up in me in those situations instead of taking out vengeance and being Mr. Tough Guy. We don't have many situations like that every day. And it is challenging.

These are the challenging words of Jesus. And you go, yeah, but take the outputs into prayer. Just don't come out changing everything Jesus has said.

That's all. That's all I'm saying. This is taking that his word, right? That's the challenge.

Love covers a multitude of sin. And so Jesus, the second Adam in all of these teachings, is telling us how to be fully human. He's telling us how to be fully alive.

He's illustrating how to be peacemakers. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God. Like father, like son.

Like father, like the son. He sends us out as lambs among wolves. We have to be good with that.

And so this is a call to cruciformity. Maybe a new word for you. Michael Gorman uses it a lot.

I think it's a good word because we talk about spiritual formation. And yet our spiritual formation is rooted in the cross of Christ Jesus. Crucified, risen, reigning and returning.

This is the call to cruciformity. The cross will form our lives around the values of Jesus. And it's called suffering love.

Suffering love. Love suffers in Latin. Compassion means to suffer with.

Compassion. Passion. We didn't really celebrate the passion.

The suffering. And we're called to be compassionate people. I mean, you got to think about what that means.

The implications of being compassionate, right? It's suffering love. That's what Jesus is trying to illustrate here. This is his instruction on how to deny ourselves.

That is the disordered self. And take up our cross in union with the crucified and risen Lord. Our Old Testament passage.

Be holy. Our New Testament passage. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Same idea, except now it's been given inside of us. And then our gospel. Be perfect.

Like your Abba. I want to end with a prophecy. You didn't know that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prophet, right? The cost of discipleship is an exposition on the Sermon on the Mount.

He starts riffing here on page 150. And I just want to read this to you and we'll end. This was written in 1937.

He later became a martyr by the Nazis. This commandment that we should love our enemies and forego revenge will grow even more urgent in the holy struggle which lies before us and in which we partly have already been engaged for years. In it, love and hate engage in mortal combat.

It is the urgent duty of every Christian soul to prepare itself for God will incur not only the hatred and the fury of the world, for on the whole it has come to that already, but complete ostracism from human society, as they call it. The Christians will be hounded from place to place, subjected to physical assault, maltreatment, and death of every kind. We are approaching an age of widespread persecution.

Therein lies the true significance of all the movements and conflicts of our age. Our adversaries seek to root out the Christian church and the Christian faith because they cannot live side by side with us, because they see in every word we utter and every deed we do, even when they are not specifically directed against them, a condemnation of their own words and deeds. They are not far wrong.

They suspect, too, that we are indifferent to their condemnation. They must admit that it is utterly futile to condemn us. We do not reciprocate their hatred and contention, although they would like it better if we did, and so to sink to their own level.

And how is the battle to be fought? Soon the time will come when we shall pray, not as isolated individuals, but as a corporate body, a congregation, a church. We shall pray in multitudes, albeit in relatively small multitudes. And among the thousands and thousands of apostates, we shall loudly praise and confess the Lord, who was crucified and is risen and shall come again.

And what prayer, what confession, what hymn of praise will it be? It will be the prayer of earnest love for these very sons of perdition, who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred and who have perhaps already raised their hands to kill us. It will be a prayer for the peace of these erring, devastated and bewildered souls. A prayer for the same love and peace which we ourselves.

Love your enemies and pray for those who despitefully use you. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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