

“A Higher Standard”

The Rev. Dr. Robert M. Zanicky

April 25, 2010

*1st Presbyterian Church
Wilkes-Barre, PA
Matthew 5:38-48*

Last Sunday afternoon I drove across the state to pick up my mother, and bring her back to Wilkes-Barre, for a visit. It was a beautiful day. The traffic was light. No police on Interstate 80 (not that that mattered). I was about two thirds of the way across the state, listening to some wonderful Christian music, when I happened to notice that my car was noting the fact that I was almost out of gas. I couldn't believe it, but it was true.

How long it had been trying to tell me – “Get some gas!” I didn't know. I got a bit anxious. I took the next exit only to find no gas! I returned to 80 West ah, just a few miles (a sign read “gas”). I exited only to find a service station boarded up!! Someone needs to take that sign down, I calmly thought. I crossed 80 and saw a car pulling into a lot. I followed and as the man got out of his car, I called out to him, “I'm almost out of gas. Is there a station nearby?” He came over to the car and said “there is one 8 miles north on this route.” I looked nervous. He quickly said, “I'll follow you there. If you run out, I'll help you.” He was back in his car, and off we went. I made it to the station with him behind. I wanted to thank him, but he just turned off and around and was gone.

Well, I got my gas, and decided to retrace my steps. I returned to his home. Knocked on the door, and Lee came out. I thanked him and tried to give him some cash for his help. He smiled and said, “No way!” I thanked him again, and continued my journey, with gasoline and an even higher sense of the goodness of the day!

Lee could have been kind and just told me the directions, but he reacted with a Higher Standard, he got in his car and went the extra miles! And would take nothing for his generous act.

I had never met Lee, until Sunday afternoon and will probably never see him again, but he had learned about this higher standard, this going the extra mile.

My guess is, he learned it from the Christian culture that continues to find expression, even on the exits of Interstate 80. “Going the extra mile,” an idiom that quickly conjures up a higher standard of living. You've heard of living ethically to a higher standard. And within context, and certain parameters, I agree. But, actually, the Christian (you), all of us, according to our scriptures, tradition and history are all called to a higher standard.

Perusing history, we can see a development, an evolution(?) of moral behavior. (Please keep in mind this direction is not inexorable, it can and has changed downward during certain periods, and in certain areas of world history). But, Jesus has set the benchmark very, very high for us. Some can lament and whine about this “impossibility”, or one can take on the human challenge to reach out to grasp and take hold of a higher standard of behavior!

In ancient times the blood feud was at work. If a member of your tribe was maimed, hurt by someone of another tribe, it was your duty to revenge that harm. Proportion need not enter into the equation. Someone loses an eye – kill the perpetrator! And the back and forth commences – planned destruction. Enters the “Lex Talionis” (“an eye for an eye”) in ancient Israel, akin to “The code of Hammurabi”). No more will it be allowed to kill for offences that themselves did not cause death! No! Proportionality is introduced and embraced in “Law”.

Only an eye for an eye!

Only a tooth for a tooth!

Not a life for a tooth or an eye!

A higher standard! Foreign to us, but a move toward a higher civilization.

The ancient Israelites go further. They develop cities of refuge (six of them strategically placed throughout the land). These are sanctuaries where a person can run to after causing harm, death (accidental) to someone. These cities upon hearing their pleas could bring them within their walls and protect them from tribal revenge. A court would then decide the case. Again, a higher standard!

And then, centuries later Jesus knowing his great Jewish tradition and its cultural/moral laws, and its creativity, announces another great leap in moral/ethical reasoning, and human relations! In his Sermon on the Mount, at one point Jesus knowing what they know declares, reconsideration of moral behavior laws. Jesus is upfront. He declares – “In no way have I come to do away with the law and the prophets...No way! These laws, rules, God’s rules, are here to stay. So pay attention to them!”

But then he proceeds to further lift up those laws, those wondrous teachings! I’ve only read a few verses this morning. Read the whole chapter 5 to get the total impact. But here goes...

“You have heard that it was said to the men of old...” (And he repeats this phrase, again and again and again, making his point of knowing his past, its greatness and its application for today.) You’ve heard of the “lex talionis”, “an eye for an eye...” but let’s consider something far greater and merciful. (Now there were social/political ramifications to all of these concerns – but the raising to a higher standard of ethical/moral behavior trumps those historic antecedents.) And this is not a treatise on pacifism, nor absolute non-violence. But, it is a revolutionary reformulation as to how to look at your world!

Justice is not out the window, but a more nuanced way of living together is introduced. Justice remains, but with a more human/divine face. And among all of these challenges “...if you are forced to go one mile, go with him two miles.” Go the extra mile!

In Jesus’ day the Romans occupying Israel’s land could legally require the Jews to carry their belongings one mile – Jesus says – “Fine, go with them the extra mile!” This would probably bewilder the Romans! Shock them! Perhaps some non-violent resistance? Teaching multiple lessons? But, these multiple teachings presented by Jesus have uplifted our moral standards. Of course, we haven’t always lived up to them, or anywhere near them, but there they are, banners, examples, challenges, inspirational guides, markers for living a Christian life, a civilized life.

You have been called, by virtue of being a Christian to a particular standard, which includes “going the extra mile.” Now that can be interpreted and experienced in a myriad of ways – but it’s there!

Here it is! Going the extra mile!

Doing more than what is just, reasonably required! That's it!!

Going the extra mile!

At home!

At work!

At school!

Wherever!

Holding yourself to this higher standard will bless and change your life, as well as the others around you.

Again, Jesus' "You've heard it this way, but now I say..." is an ideal, a challenge to uplift yourself, to lift your gaze above the fray, and to live always reaching for Christ's higher standard!

Amen.