

A Sermon Preached at UNIVERSITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, Seattle, WA

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Jeremiah 31:31-34, Matt:5:17

The week of September 11, 2001 has imprinted upon our minds and hearts pictures and sounds we will never forget. The raw evil of terrorism attacked our country, took away precious lives and left thousands of others as casualties of these brutal acts: people physically wounded, families who lost a father or mother, sister or brother.

We in Seattle are many miles from Washington D.C., Pennsylvania and New York City, but we experienced this day as we and all the world watched and listened, and prayed and waited. We witnessed tragedy and we also witnessed the sheer courage of firefighters, police officers, and ordinary office workers who helped wounded people find safety. We will never forget the courage of New York's fire fighters who entered a stricken building to help find people. They have enriched the meaning of the word hero. Now it is the task of every civilized nation to work together to find and bring to justice the terrorists who planned this assault on human life.

As your Pastor, I have been asking the questions: What can we do as a congregation in Seattle to be helpful to those who have endured so much harm? What can we do to minister thoughtfully to our people here in our congregation and in this city?

First, we pray for God's help. We are a worshipping fellowship and on the evening of September 11, a large gathering of our people met at UPC to pray. On Friday, September 14 at noon, we mourned and prayed in public worship for those who died and we thanked God for the bravery and love that was shown by the heroes of that day. On this Sunday, September 16, we are worshipping, the Sunday School is loving our children, we will listen to God's word, and we will pray for peace and hope. We are also receiving a special offering

to aid those who suffered in this disaster; we pray for the safety of our Muslim neighbors and for the protection of those of Middle Eastern heritage in our country.

Second, we as a church must carry on with the mandate of the Gospel and invest in the future with hope and thoughtful strategy. On Sunday, September 8, we commissioned our Sunday School teachers and today, we commission an outstanding group of young university graduates who will be in ministry this year as interns among our youth and university students. On October 21, we will present our 4th graders with their Bibles. Our task is clear: we must, with the help of God's grace, show his love and teach the truth of the Gospel. We must not retreat from this good responsibility because the best cure for the bad is the healthy diet of the good.

Third, our Children and Family Ministries has prepared a very helpful packet of guidance information to aid parents in comforting children during times of crises. These packets are available at the church.

Fourth, each of us in our families need to reach out toward one another. We need our neighbors, we need to feel safe with each other, and we need to be washed and comforted by the love that heals. We need to learn the truth of the Good News, and to know the joy that comes from the Lord of Peace. Lord Jesus, be our teacher today; comfort, protect, and encourage all those who suffer today and teach our hearts from your sermon, so that we may comfort and encourage others. Amen.

Our message for today is the second in a series of expositional sermons on The Teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, and his sermon, The Sermon on the Mount. Matthew narrates this sermon in three Chapters: 5, 6, and 7. Last Sunday, we listened in on this sermon as Jesus

shared nine blessings. Today, we look at a bold sentence (by our Teacher) that follows those blessings that we call the Beatitudes:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

(Matt. 5:17)

With this sentence, Jesus takes into his hands the Law of Moses and the Prophets of sacred Scripture. At this point Jesus could conceivably move in several directions in his sermon. He could *reject* everything in the peoples’ past: their traditions and their Law. Some few listeners might have welcomed just that sort of approach. After all, even with the possession of the Law of Moses, and the traditions that grew out of the Law, as a people they were apparently little better off under Roman oppression than during the time when they first received the Torah, more than twelve hundred years earlier in the wilderness. When some people feel that kind of social and political helplessness, they often welcome Prophets who throw out the past with its apparent impotence, and offer what appears to be a totally new option. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this mood and desire in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* as those who want a “fruitful radicalism in the place of a barren mediocrity.” Could it not have been argued that the Law of Mount Sinai had failed, along with the Prophets who honored the Law?

Another group who might have welcomed the discarding of the Law were those who felt personally trapped and demoralized by it. The Law represented condemnation to them because they felt its weight upon their shoulders, and if Jesus were to cancel it, he would

probably have had their support. If we feel condemned by the Law because of certain of our sins, we might welcome the elimination of the document that makes us feel guilty.

Jesus could also take the opposite approach; he could simply and plainly *restate* the Law as the common tradition of the people. He might join the Saducee Party and return strictly to the texts of the Pentateuch, or he might include the broader way of the Pharisees, whose later traditions of interpretation had been refined since the time of the Maccabean Revolt (about 160 B.C.). If Jesus were to favor the more limited way, he would have the support of the Sadducee party; if he were to favor the broader restatement, he would have the support of the Pharisee party.

Jesus chooses a third way, and risks the disappointment of all the special interest groups now waiting to hear his teaching. He takes hold of the Law and the traditions that surround the Ten Commandments as if they were an unfinished portrait; he now draws together the separate parts of the Law toward the completion of their original intention. Think of it this way; Jesus treats the Law as if it were a great arc. Have you ever put together an electric train? Four years ago my grown up kids gave me a Lionel train because I always wanted one and they knew it. I put it together and its oval track surrounds our Christmas tree each Christmas. Did you ever look at one of the curved sections of track? It just seems to cry out for more track and if you keep adding other curved sections, it will make a perfect circle; add some straight track and you have an oval. The curve is a perfect arc and it anticipates its completion as a circle. It has meaning and integrity within itself but it wants its fulfillment.

Jesus now extends the line of the arc around to its fulfillment, the circle for which it was originally designed. Jesus completes the circle, and that is the meaning of the word that

he uses to describe his purpose toward the Law and the Prophets: *fulfill*. Fulfill means literally to “fill up or complete.” C.S. Lewis explains this unforgettably in his book, Miracles:

“Let us suppose we possess parts of a novel or a symphony. Someone now brings us a newly discovered piece of manuscript and says, ‘This is the missing part of the work. This is the chapter on which the whole plot of the novel really turned. This is the main theme of the symphony.’ Our business would be to see whether the new passage, if admitted to the central place which the discoverer claimed for it, did actually illuminate all the parts we had already seen and ‘pull them together.’ Nor should we be likely to go very far wrong. The new passage, if spurious, however attractive it looked at the first glance, would become harder and harder to reconcile with the rest of the work the longer we considered the matter. But if it were genuine, then at every fresh hearing of the music or every fresh reading of the book, we should find it settling down, making itself more at home, and eliciting significance from all sorts of details in the whole work which we had hitherto neglected.”

The Prophets of the Bible preached and lived out three messages as they spoke for God on the importance of righteousness:

1. First was the ethical theme in every Prophet’s affirmation, with its clear call to repentance by the people.
2. The Prophets also announced stern judgment themes as in Isaiah 1, where the Lord says to the people through Isaiah: “I cannot endure your solemn assembly because you have blood on your hands...” Jeremiah speaks this stern judgment on behalf of God to the people: “Your hurt is incurable, and your wound is grievous.” (Jeremiah 30:12)

3. Ironically, the words of hope are usually right next to the judgment sentences.

Following Isaiah's harsh warning that the Lord will not endure us because of our bloodied hands, comes the sentence "Come now let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your hands are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

Also, Jeremiah's greatest promise follows as the next sentence. After the harsh words of our incurable illness, the words we heard in today's Old Testament lesson, "I will restore your health..." (Jeremiah 30:17) These prophetic words of judgment and hope both converge and come together at the profound events at Mt. Calvary and the empty tomb of Easter.

I remember an unforgettable experience of mine when I was a young Pastor here at UPC. Karl Barth made his one trip to America in 1963 and gave a series of lectures at Princeton, which I was fortunate to attend. On one evening in the Princeton Lounge, he answered questions from the more than 1,000 students and theologians who were present. His son, Markkus Barth, took the questions and translated them to his father in German and then Barth answered in English. A few weeks earlier, the Nazi War criminal, SS Officer Adolf Eichmann, had been captured and was then on trial for his crimes against humanity. One student asked the question: "Dr. Barth, now that Adolf Eichmann has been caught, can we now put the guilt of Germany on his shoulders?" There was an electricity in the air as we waited for the answer from this great theologian, who had bravely opposed Hitler; who had written the Barmen Declaration in 1934; who had been expelled from Germany and his teaching post at Bonn, and who then as a Swiss theologian took up what became his lifelong post at Basel University. After his son gave him the question in German – Barth spoke, "No, the guilt of Germany has been placed on quite another man's shoulders." I will never forget that moment; it was the sheer breakthrough of the Gospel in that room. Jesus Christ is the

only one able to fulfill the Prophets, with their complicated three-part message of righteousness, severe judgment and hope for God's Messiah. It has all come together on the shoulders of one man, Jesus Christ. He has taken our place at the Cross of Calvary where he has defeated sin and death and the power of all evil, including the devil, by disarming them of their final power. Jesus will bring the arc of the Prophet's message around to its grand fulfillment. The Disciples hear of that fulfillment in our Lord's Sermon and they will experience that fulfillment as events on Holy Friday and Holy Sunday.

This week, two Christian television preachers made the statement that in their view the tragedy at New York City World Trade Center had perhaps happened because God had withdrawn his protection from America in judgment because of our national sinfulness. Our President called their remarks unhelpful and hurtful. I agree with the President, but as a Christian I must challenge their words at an even deeper level. Their words are false teaching. What they said reveals a faulty Christology. It was Karl Barth who said "Tell me how it stands with your Christology and I will tell you who you are." Jesus Christ has, in himself, fulfilled the Prophets stern warning as much as their hopes for God's salvation. This Jesus is the one who boundaries the whole of human history. The fact is that only once did God withdraw his protective boundary and that was when his Son, Jesus, was alone on the Cross.

There is a mystery also in human history because one of God's sovereign decisions is the decision that gives us real freedom, which means we can do good or we can do harm. Therefore, within the grand boundaries of our creation by God's decision and the final fulfilling of history in the return of Jesus Christ, the line of our human story is turbulent. There are the brilliant strokes of human goodness and wisdom with the positive

consequences that result. But there are also the downward strokes of human evil and cruelty; acts which are against the Will of God. Therefore, tragedy is concrete and real, but even our acts that do harm are not ultimate because Jesus Christ holds in his hand the boundary. Not only that, but his faithfulness and grace is able to redeem in the middle of tragedy.

At the National Worship Service, America's beloved Pastor, Reverend Billy Graham, said it simply, and powerfully. He tenderly spoke to our country in its time of grief and his deepest word of comfort came when he said, "There is a mystery about evil, but as a Christian I look to the person Jesus Christ who endured all evil on the Cross; Jesus understands our tragedy and he has conquered death itself." As Billy Graham spoke, the TV camera in that great National Cathedral lifted and focused upon the Cross of Christ on the altar of the church.

We have a man for the crisis, which is better than a theory or a set of answers; the man who has fulfilled every judgment and every hope of the Prophets. Let us hear Jesus, that man, speak to us as he did on the Thursday evening of Holy Week: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid...I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." John 14:18,19,27 and John 16:33