

Law of the Land

A sermon expositing Matthew 5:17-48

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You have heard that it was said, “plastics, glass, and paper goods go in the recycling not the trash!”

You have also heard that it was said, “trade in your extended cab, long bed, turbo charged, King Ranch Texas Edition 4x4 with the towing package for a Prius, or better yet, get a bike!”

You have also heard that it was said, “if you’re using standard incandescent light bulbs, you may as well be suffocating a baby seal with your bare hands.”

You have also heard it said, “Thou shalt not, indeed thou cannot use plastic shopping bags in New York as of March 1.”

These are some of the rules of taking care of the earth - *the law of the land* if you will. They are derived, as good advice or as official regulation, out of our need to take better care of the home we all share. At a purely scientific level, the earth’s climate is changing and if we don’t do anything about it, life as we know it will end. At a theological level, we also know that the earth is a gift, but not one to be held strictly for personal gain. Being given the earth is like being given a piece of family property – we should be deriving our enjoyment *of* it from our caring *for* it, we should be sharing it widely, and we should be ready to pass it on to the next generation in better shape than we received it. But, should this – should being a steward of the earth - be a high priority for the church and for Christians or is creation care merely some secondary activity to fill the gaps between all our soul work? It would have been nice if Jesus would have said something about caring for creation or about climate change.

I’d like to invite you to take a little retreat with me, only a momentary one though. You don’t need to pack a bag, just come along with me for a moment in your imagination to one of my favorite places on earth – the mountains. Let’s take a hike under the evergreens, across the rippling streams, up toward the snow-capped peak until we reach that spot, that crest where the entire valley and the range of mountains across come entirely into view. You forget to breathe it’s so beautiful, unspeakable, soul soothing. Stop with me here on the mountain and hear the words of Jesus in the sermon – on the mount.

I know it’s not the kind of mountain that Matthew told us Jesus was on, but Luke even reported this sermon happening on the plane. If gospel writers get a little creative license, so do we. Maybe you prefer to hear the words of Jesus out in the woods, fireside at night. Maybe in a kayak, or in a garden, or on a sailboat, sea breeze across your face. Wherever you can hear them best, join us there and hear the voice of Jesus echoing in the valley, lofting above the trickling stream, rolling in with the tide.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law...I have come to fulfill it.”

I have asked you to join me in these “earthy” places to hear these words of Jesus, because I wonder if Jesus has come to fulfill what we’ve called this morning “the law of the land” just as he did to fulfill the law of

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

Torah. Just as there are those who believe that caring for creation is a misplaced emphasis of the church, so too in Jesus's day there were those who thought that for his new followers keeping the traditional Torah/law was useless if not harmful, but Jesus said he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it. To begin illustrating what he meant by that he used a set of 6 antitheses or as I like to call them - *you've-heard-it-was-said*s.

"You have heard that it was said [-] 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that [everyone] who looks...with lust has already committed adultery." It sounds at first as if Jesus is just making the rules more strict! If we look at the six *you've-heard-it-was-said*s together though, we get another picture. You've heard it said, love you neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say love even the enemies. We're not protecting borders here, we're building inclusive love. You've heard it said you shall not swear falsely, but I say why swear at all? Just be honest all the time. It's not legalese we're safeguarding, it's vulnerability, trust, and honesty. He goes on like that picking topics of the day as illustration. In each the "rule" or the law gets harder to live up to, yes, but only because with each Jesus makes the turn to the internal, to the relational. The law, for Jesus, isn't about right behavior, it's about building and maintaining beneficial relationship to God and to others with whom you share the world. Don't just strive to not lie, strive for openness and self-disclosure. Don't just avoid adultery, strive for faithfulness in every phase of life. The law fulfilled holds people together with one another and with God. What about the law of the land?

I thought about writing a *you've-heard-it-said* about caring for creation, but then I noticed I don't have to come up with one, it's already there. We've read it a thousand times and never noticed it. I think we've never noticed it, because we forget or just never notice that we are, in fact, in relationship with creation. We've misunderstood what "dominion" means. In one of the two stories about God's gifting humans to creation and creation to humans at the beginning of the Bible the humans in the story are told to have "dominion" over all creation. To have dominion, or to *dominate* in our culture means to seize for one's own, to control and use for one's own purposes, and so we have done with respect to the earth. Majestic mountains having stood for millions of years are leveled in a few months time, because they hide some usable substance within. The delicate balance of particles in the air is obliterated little by little in the name of industry. Creatures are bred who will never experience a moment of peace, comfort, or freedom in the name of cheap food. Soils are farmed for efficiency, not balance. It's ours to have and to dominate, but that isn't what our faith ancestors were telling us about God's creation.

They carefully crafted their words to show not *ownership*, but *relationship*. Dominion is to *care for* the rest of creation. This act of caring is to be the source of our delight in creation. The story goes so far as to say that the first humans were actually formed of the earth itself. Though it is written in mythological language we cannot deny that we are nothing more than dust of the earth combined with the animating breath of God. This by-the-way is the central theme of Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent beginning just ten days from now. We are dirt, we are earth, and we cannot subsist without the rest of the created order; we are created by God for the earth and the earth for us. That's *relationship*!

So we have no need to *imagine* what Jesus might have said about how we are to care for creation. He's already told us. "You have heard that it was said..., 'Do not murder', but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment..." Jesus forces us to realize that murder is really the ultimate form of a broken relationship and what is climate change, but a broken relationship with the earth? Jesus points out that fulfilling the law does not mean to simply live and let live, but proactively pursue relationships characterized by forgiveness, mercy, grace, love. This is the *fullness* of the law, that when a relationship takes a bad turn we would engage in the gut wrenching, but deeply fulfilling work of restoration.

You have heard it said, "Take out the recycling." You have heard it said, "drive a small car." Don't use plastic bags. What more is all of this than the equivalent of "Do not murder?" They are practical, legalistic, necessary steps toward preventing us from killing our oldest relative, the earth itself. But these rules are not the fullness of the law. Jesus himself tells us that the restoration of relationship is the fullness of the law.

"Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not" can't save us or the earth from the trajectory we are on. But the things that make for restoration in relationship might. Apologizing – recognizing how we've contributed to

harming the relationship between ourselves and promising to try to do better. Self work – taking a deep dive into the relational issues between ourselves and the earth to more fully understand the dynamics at play and how those dynamics might be changed. How about time together? I know it's still winter out, but most of us have coats and gloves. Get out there, let a chickadee eat from your hand at Mendon Ponds Park or go out to see the snowy white, rolling hills of Western New York – or just *notice* them next time you're driving through anyway. When Spring comes, read a good book with your back against a sturdy tree, get to the Adirondacks, or just put your hands in the soil at your own home. Plant a few vegetables, but not because it's cheaper than the grocery store or healthier. If that's true, thank the bit of land they came from, but in the end, do it because it's an exchange of gifts with a loved one. These kinds of things can only serve to turn our minds and our hearts toward our fellow creation in love and gratitude. It could only help restore my relationship and in that relationship there can be great delight.

I suspect if we become far less concerned with simply not killing the earth and more concerned with loving and appreciating creation, taking out the recycling, switching light bulbs, or even advocating for more responsible industry will seem a lot less onerous. Just a labor of love. This is the law of the land. Amen.

