

A Balancing Act

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Celebrating *The Way of Transformation*

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8

[Jesus said],

“Everyone who pays attention to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a shrewd builder who erected a house on bedrock. Later the rain fell, and the torrents came, and the winds blew and pounded that house, yet it did not collapse, since its foundation rested on bedrock. Everyone who listens to these words of mine and doesn’t act on them will be like a careless builder, who erected a house on sand. When the rain fell, and the torrents came, and the winds blew and pounded that house, it collapsed. Its collapse was colossal.”

And so, when Jesus had finished this discourse, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, since he had been teaching them on his own authority, unlike their (own) scholars.

Matthew 7:24-29ⁱ

We have reached the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

Every now and then you run across a text in the scriptures that seems so familiar that you know what it says. But when you go back and read it, you see that it says something quite different.

For example, when Elohim puts the bow or the rainbow in the sky in Genesis after Noah and his family have landed safely. They leave the ark

and they make a sacrifice in thanksgiving to Yahweh. Yahweh puts a bow or a rainbow in the sky as a reminder.

Do you remember the reminder? What is the reminder?

The bow is a reminder that Elohim will never again destroy all flesh by flood.

When the bow is seen, it will be a sign.

Who will see the bow and remember?

Not Noah. Not the people of Earth.

I always think it is that. The rainbow is in the sky, to remind us that God won't destroy the world by flood. But the text says this:

“This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”

The rainbow is not for us so that we remember. It is so God remembers. You don't want God to get forgetful about a thing like that.

Lets say next Tuesday, that God gets mad, brings along some clouds and tosses down some lightning bolts. Stirs up a hurricane with his finger in the South Atlantic. He is on a roll. Then, oops, there is that rainbow.

He says to himself, “Oh, rats that's right. The rainbow. I made a deal not to wipe these guys out.”

He is the one who needs to remember, because he is the one with the power to flood us out. The bow is our protection from God's wrath.

It is a wonderful ancient text. You have to appreciate its playfulness. The forgetful God who needs a bow in the sky to remember not to destroy us.

That is an example of a text that is so familiar, that I know what it says. But when I read it, it says something different than what I thought it said.

It seems odd. I have ideas about God. God doesn't forget. God needs no reminder. So it must be me who needs to remember. But according to the text, it is God who needs the reminding.

There are many examples of texts that are like that. That is one.

The one we read today from Matthew is another. At least for me.

If you ask me what it says, I would summarize it in this way:

Two guys built a house. One on a rock. The other on sand. The rains came and destroyed the house built on the sand. The house built on the rock was not destroyed. What is the moral of the story? Build your life on the teachings and the life of Jesus. That's the rock. That is how the wise will build their lives, on the foundation of Jesus.

But that isn't what the text says. The rock, the foundation is not the teachings of Jesus.

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The rock upon which the house is built is not the words of Jesus. It is acting upon the words.

Both the wise and the foolish builders know the words of Jesus. They have listened. They may even both admire the words. But the difference between them is that one acts on the words and the other doesn't.

This text isn't about believing stuff or knowing the words. It isn't that the words of Jesus are great in and of themselves, they are only good to the extent that they are enacted.

This is one of those passages in the Bible in which I think I know what it says, but I need to read again to see what it really says.

When I read this, I am reminded that building a house that will withstand the storms, is not about having the right religion. It isn't about being smart or creating a clever theology. That is what I would like it to be. I would like it to all be about speculation. I like that stuff.

Maybe it is about interpreting the words in a new and profound way. I love to spend hours doing that. If I can just find the right interpretation of the words, then I will have it down.

John Dominic Crossan, a biblical scholar, who has done a great deal in helping me to understand and appreciate the historical Jesus, wrote a book in 1994 entitled: *Jesus a Revolutionary Biography*. It was a book that helped me to open my eyes to the person of Jesus and to the writers of the Gospels. I found a Jesus through Crossan that spoke to me. Jesus was about welcoming the outcasts and challenging of systems of oppression. Jesus was about honesty. Jesus was about showing us God's realm among us all.

Jesus was about non-violent love of enemies. He offered a vision of a different way of living in the world.

Crossan himself was rather impressed with the Jesus he discovered. In the front of his book, he writes about an imaginary conversation he had between Jesus and himself. The historical Jesus speaks first:

"I've read your book, Dominic, and it's quite good. So now you're ready to live by my vision and join me in my program?"

"I don't think I have the courage, Jesus, but I did describe it quite well, didn't, and the method was especially good, wasn't it?"

"Thank you, Dominic, for not falsifying the message to suit your own incapacity. That at least is something."

“Is it enough, Jesus?”

“No, Dominic it is not.”

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According to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, the wise among us are those that act upon the words, not just hear them. We have all heard the words.

Who has not heard, “Do to others what you would have them do to you?”

Who has not heard, “Blessed are the peacemakers” or “love your enemies” or “do not return evil for evil?”

Who has not heard, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy?”

Who has not heard, “You are the light of the world?”

Who has not heard, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Who has not heard, “Therefore don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear....strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Who has not heard, “Do not judge so that you may not be judged” or “Ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened.”

We have all heard, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

We have heard all of this before. Many times. The Sermon on the Mount is probably the most famous and most quoted sermon in history. It is a sermon that has been heard by Christians and non-Christians alike.

It is a sermon that has been memorized and recited and acted out in the movies. It is a sermon that we all know.

True wisdom is to act upon what you know.

Today, we honor the spiritual path that is called “the way of transformation.” This is the path of action. We become participants in the transformation that the Holy Spirit is bringing to Creation.

It is possible to get hung up by confusing action with perfection.

For example, we may try to love our enemies, or someone who has wronged us in some way. And we may find it difficult to do so. In fact, it may even become more difficult as we try to do it.

We might then feel either that it is worthless to try, or we get down on ourselves that we are somehow not a loving one’s enemy kind of person.

Jesus didn’t say his sermon was easy. In fact, he said in the sermon that the road was narrow and few find it. But, he did say that the wise do what they hear.

The point is, that yes, you are a loving one’s enemy kind of person. You are. We all are. We all can and very likely have done many of the things that Jesus says to do. We have done that. We haven’t always done it.

There is no reason to give up because we didn’t do so well. We try again. It isn’t about being perfect, it is about doing it.

It is a spiritual standard that is high. But high does not necessarily mean unattainable. It does not mean that we beat ourselves up for not doing it right every time. It doesn’t mean that we use it to measure someone else’s shortcomings.

The wise take the sermon seriously enough to bring it to consciousness and to live by it whenever and as often as we can.

I believe that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is as vital today as it has ever been. I don’t necessarily mean for someone else, I mean for me. I think it has a vitality—a life—that is worth emulating.

I think it is good for us to hear it again and again. To wrestle with its hard passages. To try to interpret it in the various situations we face. That is good.

And much better to put it into practice.

ⁱ Scholars' Version