

Sermon – Matthew 5:21-37; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9  
David R. Lyle  
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“God (Not You) Gives the Growth”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I was raised attending a Lutheran church. We sat four pews from the front on the lectern side, week after week, year after year. That being the case, one might imagine that the greatest influence on my spiritual development was St. Paul or Martin Luther. Or perhaps one of my pastors. And while they all made a difference, I think it's safe to say that the person who most impacted eight-year-old me lived not only long ago, but in a galaxy far, far away. I'm speaking of Luke Skywalker, of course. Have you heard of him? I'm not sure I've ever mentioned *Star Wars* during a sermon. *Ahem*. The scene I have in mind this morning occurs on the forest moon of Endor near the end of *Return of the Jedi*, when Luke looks at Darth Vader, the homicidal half-man, half-machine Luke has recently learned is his father (um, sorry, forty-year-old spoilers). And in a poignant, beautiful, desperate moment, Luke says to his dad, “I know there is good in you.” In trying to turn Vader from the dark to the light side of the force, Luke appeals to his dad to take a nice long look within himself, because that's where he'll find the good. All Luke needs to do is help Vader fan that nice little spark of goodness into a flame of righteousness, and Vader can find redemption. It works, at least in the movie. And we tend to think it works in our galaxy, too. That there is nothing so wrong with us that we can't find the solution within ourselves. You may prefer different mythologies, but the message is often the same: the good that you need is deep within you, if you can but find it and draw it out.

2. As we continue sitting at Jesus' feet through the Sermon on the Mount, we are presented with a very different vision of ourselves. An uncomfortable vision. A true vision, revealing that perhaps the further we delve into ourselves, the deeper the problems become and the less likely we are to find what we need. Jesus, having reminded us that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets, now tells us what this fullness looks like. It does not mean simply checking the boxes of the surface demands of the Law: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't swear falsely. The fullness God desires extends to our innermost thoughts. Our anger, our lust, the thoughts that rush through our fragmented minds that draw us away from God and set us in opposition to one another. Jesus casts a vision here for what our lives could be, but it's a vision that first ensnares us, for we have all fallen short. I may be able to say I've upheld the demands of the Law in practice, but not in thought. Jesus tightens the screws here, inviting us to acknowledge that, when it comes to righteousness before God or the hope of true reconciliation with one another, self-help is really just self-deception. We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. The truth is that the truth is not in us.
  
3. Martin Luther spent much of his ministry seeking to counter other reformers who followed in his wake, those he referred to as enthusiasts. That's a word that's shifted in meaning, a term we use to refer to those who are passionately interested in some hobby or pursuit, or who exuberantly cheer on others, like those decked out on this Super Bowl Sunday in Eagles' green or Chiefs' red. But the word itself comes from the Greek – *en theos* – which means the god within. Luther knew that we humans have a remarkable tendency to mistake ourselves for God, to believe that what we need is in ourselves, all evidence to the contrary. And the evidence is clear. We live in a world in which anger often leads to violence; in which our lust for others, or for power, leads to broken relationships; in which our boastful promises ultimately disappoint. No, looking inside ourselves will not lead us to God.

And looking around shows us just how wrong we've gotten things, no matter how enthusiastic we may feel.

4. What, then, are we to do? Well, Jesus offers one possible solution. If our eyes cause us to sin, pluck them out! If our hands offend, cut them off (and be more like Luke Skywalker!). But looking at you all today, it seems that you haven't taken Jesus at his word. Or maybe he's not serious. Or maybe he's so very serious that he means something else. Jesus' words today force us to acknowledge our sin and its consequences, demand that we admit that we cannot save ourselves. And it is precisely here, forced to look outside ourselves, that we see the One who can save us. Jesus does not finally demand that we further fragment ourselves. He is the One who will be cut and cut off from God and others, plucked from heaven's joys to be placed on the cross. He is the one who descends into hell. He is the One who endures all this in our place, to save us both for eternity and from the hells we create for ourselves and each other today. Stop looking *in here*. Look there, at the cross, and see your salvation. That which you could never do has been done for you. The law is fulfilled. The Kingdom is yours. Granted new life, the Holy Spirit does now take up residence within you.
  
5. It is in the new life of Christ, in which Christ dwells in us, that we find hope for this fragmented world. Hope for peace that triumphs over anger and violence. For relationships built on mutuality, not lust or power. For marriages to grow in holy love or, when marriages have ceased to be life-giving, or have become dangerous, to find hope and life after a marriage ends. In all of this, we receive wholeness, inside ourselves and among each other. It is here, in Christ, that we are gifted with the hope of reconciliation, of transcending all that divides us. We may not argue among ourselves like the Corinthians about who belongs to Paul and who to Apollos, but we have divided ourselves along many other lines, lines of race, or class, or political affiliation. Yesterday, Pastor Sunitha Mortha led a retreat on Diversity,

Inclusion, and Belonging for the leadership of Grace. She reminded us that there is great power in our stories, but how we can also reduce others to single elements of their story, essentially turning people into objects. But Christ breaks us out of these narratives by placing us once more into God's story. Made alive together in Christ, our distinctions are not erased but our false divisions are destroyed as God calls us together as servants, working now together, bearing witness to the growth that God alone can give. Here, in Christ, we discover the place where we all belong.

6. Today's words are words of judgment, but judgment can be good, for it leads to justice. The preacher Tom Long writes, "Judgment is God's repairing of the broken creation. Judgment is God's scalpel carefully removing the malignant tissue that threatens life. Judgment is God's burning away of all that is cruel and spirit-killing in order that we may breathe the air of compassion. Judgment is good news; it is God setting things right."
  
7. This morning, Jesus calls us out for who we really are. But instead of casting us out, he invites us in, offering forgiveness and granting us the gift of the Kingdom. Jesus calls us now forward, to participate in his work of reconciliation. Jesus, making peace for us with God, calls us to make peace with one another and peace throughout the world. As long as we look within ourselves, we'll never find what we're looking for. With life and death set before you, choose life. Look now to Christ, crucified but raised, and live. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.