

RAISING THE BAR

Deuteronomy 30:15:20
Matthew 5:21-26, 38-48

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TEXT: Matthew 5:21 and following: [Jesus said,] “You have heard it was said . . . but I say to you.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to practice the just and peaceful relationships characteristic of life in the Kingdom of God, trusting God’s grace to enable us so to live.

Most of you know that, along with serving as the pastor of this church, I also am a ski instructor at Mount Sunapee. Since December, I have been teaching people to ski part of two days almost every week. This past week, I finished up teaching four very pleasant school groups, ranging in age from six to ten. Over five weeks of lessons, my students had their share of tearful moments. Some kids were anxious and resistant to moving on to the next level of difficulty. But all my kids made great progress and, most important, even the tearful ones said that they had fun.

Even if I spent all my lesson time with kids using the moving carpets to ascend the beginners’ slopes, I always got in a few runs on my own. What this meant, among other things, is that, many times over the course of a day, I saw a sign telling me to “Raise Bar Here”—that is, to raise the bar on the chair right before it’s time to slide off the chair onto the snow. “Raising the bar” for skiers involves raising a literal bar. But “raising the bar” is an expression of speech which suggests the upping of standards. Raising the bar in sports involves expecting athletes to perform better. Raising the bar in education involves expecting more of teachers and students. Raising the bar in health care involves adopting practices designed for better treatment outcomes.

What about raising the bar in the practice of faith? That’s what Jesus was doing in today’s passage from the Sermon on the Mount. Six times, he said, “You have heard that it was said”, and then spoke of a rule about human relationships from the Law. We heard three of these this morning, about murder, retaliation for wrongs done to us, and about loving our neighbor. The three we didn’t hear address fidelity in marriage, divorce, and making promises. Every one of the legal descriptions of how we are to behave seems reasonably doable: Don’t murder. Good idea. I suppose we’ve all obeyed that one. Be faithful to your spouse. Very good idea. Remember him or her on Valentine’s Day for extra points. If you divorce, do it by the book. Okay, that makes sense. Keep your promises. Sometimes hard, but certainly the right thing to do. Restrict your response to any wrong done against you to the severity of what was done to you. “An eye for an eye” sounds harsh, but it’s better than taking a whole head for an eye. Finally, it’s proper to love the people who are close to us, but it’s okay to hate people who do us wrong. That is, sad to say, the way of the world,

but often it's how we separate people deserving of our love from people who don't. What I'm trying to point out is that examples Jesus took from the laws on the books in his time are common sense rules which are fairly easy for us to obey. We also heard a passage from one of the Old Testament books containing those laws, in which Moses told God's people that, if they wanted to live and prosper, walking in God's ways and obeying God's laws is the way to go. Well, if obeying the rules Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount are what it's like to walk in God's ways and obey God's laws, we are probably good candidates for life and prosperity.

But here comes Jesus, raising the bar with his "but I say to you." Do you want to live the life I have in mind for you? He seems to be asking. That calls for being more than a law-abiding citizen. You've heard it said that murder is against the law, but I say that being angry with another person subjects you to judgement. You've heard it said that excessive retaliation is against the law, but I say that all retaliation is forbidden. You've heard it said that we're supposed to love our neighbors, but I say we should love our enemies too, even to the point of praying for anyone who persecutes us. This is raising the bar with regard to the practice of faith, above mere obedience, and it feels like Jesus is raising the bar above what we are able to reach. Later on in his Gospel, Matthew recalled that Jesus invited people to embrace his way of life with these words: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30) Since when is it easy to avoid anger? Since when is it easy to choose non-resistance to evil, easy to turn the other cheek, to give without discretion, easy to love our enemies?

What's easy is to misunderstand the point Jesus was trying to make. Jesus was totally uninterested in laying out a new, impossibly stringent legalism. His message is gospel, not law; good news, not impossible demands. Try looking at his new way like this: Do you like the idea of living an anger-free life? Do you think that insulting people you're upset with or calling them names does no good whatsoever? Can you appreciate the value of a 'yes' that means 'yes' and a 'no' that means 'no', unembellished by 'I swear to God' kind of hype? Are you attracted to a world where people are liberated from an endless cycle of violence and retaliation, a world where generosity replaces being taken advantage of? How do you like the prospect that the way you relate to someone who comes off as your enemy brings out the best in you, rather than the worst? Even if these ways are not the way we always live, they probably describe how we'd like to live. And more: we would be pretty sure that if

everyone behaved like that, the world would be a much better place.

Well, brothers and sisters, Jesus in his raised-bar descriptions of human relationships is describing the world, or should I say, the realm, he came to establish, the realm he called the kingdom of God, the realm he insisted was coming near to us. His death and resurrection subverted the ways of this angry, vindictive world and opened the way for a new world to overtake the old one, a world where peace prevails and where love is the way. Jesus wasn't putting out his new way as a bar raised beyond our reach. He was offering a vision of the life we actually want to live, and of the world we actually want to live in. In the next chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offered his teaching on prayer, including his model prayer, which includes the line, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus' bar-raised descriptions of human relationships show us what it will be like when God's kingdom is established on earth the way it already exists in heaven.

I almost hate to go back to my experience with ski instructing to unpack how the new way of Jesus actually works, but I haven't been able to come up with a better way to explore it. In the world of ski instructing, there is a certification process, and there are levels of excellence achieved by passing tests. I am a lowly Level One instructor, although I also have Children's Specialist certification. There are three numbered certification levels, and above them, the Examiner level. Achieving Level Two certification involves demonstrating a variety of skiing skills as well as showing that the instructor can design and teach a lesson that is more complicated than getting a beginner ready to ski off the chair lift. Level Two is the bar of ski instructing raised to the next level. I've attended Level Two preparatory events and realized the bar is still beyond my reach. So, would I want the standards to be lowered so it would be easier for me to get certified? No way. The standards are right where they're supposed to be. I think it's the same with living the gospel life. Would we want Jesus to dilute his new way so we could more easily attain it? No way. Relationships in the realm of God are exactly what they are. Any compromised version – saying, for instance, that sometimes it's appropriate to be angry with someone who wrongs us, or to retaliate when we've been wronged, or that some people are so evil that they deserve our hatred, takes us out of the kingdom of God. That's exactly what we don't want.

Next similarity between living according to Jesus' new way and ski instructing: The fact that those instructing standards exist motivates me to constantly

improve my skiing and my teaching. I read books. I take workshops. I practice techniques. I talk with my colleagues about situations that come up when I'm teaching. Same with the raised bar of the kingdom life. There it is, a realm defined by right relationships with God and with other people, and here we are, aware that our ways of relating to God and to people often don't measure up. The kingdom ways function as motivators. They give us goals to work toward. And just as instructors work toward the next level a little bit at a time, so we work our way toward reaching Jesus' raised bar a little bit at a time. A suspending of anger here, an expression of love toward a person who is out to get us there— little bit by little bit, we cultivate the characteristics of living the kingdom life.

Finally, this: the attitude among ski instructors is mutually supportive, not judgmental. Frequently a colleague will point out something I'm not doing right, or celebrate with me when I helped a student move to the next level. When one of us is working toward next level certification, other instructors ask how it's going, offer support, and celebrate success. And, the instructor's association offers clinics and workshops designed to help us improve our skills. It's the same in our working toward reaching Jesus' raised bar. We embrace his way of living as members of a community of faith who offer each other support, encouragement, and guidance. Certainly that happens within our local church. But we are part of what the Apostle's Creed calls "the communion of saints," a community of people sharing the Jesus life in every place and from every time, right back to his first followers. One purpose of Sunday worship is to function as a clinic designed to help us live more faithfully. Bible studies and other learning opportunities, even next Saturday's Prepared to Serve, are the church's way to help us more fully live the kingdom's ways.

But we followers of Jesus have one thing that ski instructors don't have. We have Jesus, or, to put it more accurately, Jesus has us. The one who has raised the bar is the one who gives his whole self so we can reach it. Reaching his raised bar is not a task for us to accomplish; it is a grace for us to receive. Unlike skiing, my progress toward living the Jesus way has always felt like it came as a gift. It hasn't been me setting personal improvement goals and working toward achieving them. It was life in the realm where God's ways are the way things are inviting me, beckoning me, to find my life in that realm. The effort we invest in living that life is nothing other than our response to Jesus sharing that life with us. The gospel truth is that Jesus lifts us up to reach the bar that he has raised. All we need to do is to let him lay hold of us with his arms of love and let him raise us up.