

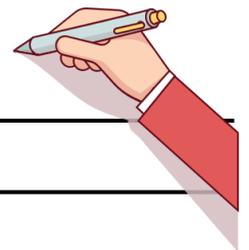


Back in the 90’s a trend developed in school discipline, called Zero Tolerance. In 1994 the federal government passed the Gun-Free Schools Act, which requires schools, who receive federal funding, to expel any student who brings a gun to campus. Around the same time, the “broken windows” theory of law enforcement became popular. The idea was that cracking down on minor violations prevented serious crimes. Using the same logic schools began enacting disciplinary policies that went further than the federal law. The rules commonly required suspending or expelling students for a variety of offenses, such as

1. Bringing any weapon to school, including seemingly innocent items like nail clippers and toy swords.
2. Having any alcohol or drugs on campus, including tobacco and over-the-counter medications like aspirin or Midol.
3. Fighting, including minor scuffles
4. Threatening other students or teachers or saying anything that could be perceived as a threat.
5. Insubordination, which could include talking back to a teacher or swearing in the principal’s office.
6. Any behavior considered disruptive, like cutting in a lunch line.

These polices were intended to make schools safe. But there is no evidence that these policies have been effective in doing that. Further, research has shown that suspending students – rather than helping them get back on track makes them more likely to drop out of school.

My Sermon Notes





Linda Vista
United Methodist Church
Matthew 5:13-20
Response to Grace

Pastor Kimberly Ports
2/9/2020

More and more educators have concluded that zero tolerance doesn't work. School districts around the country have instituted more flexible practices like "restorative justice," which focus on repairing harm, restoring relationships, and helping students become accountable for their actions. Where Zero Tolerance was a purely punitive practice, restorative justice involves education and caring for the people involved. It sounds much more labor-intensive and grace-filled. The results are showing that it is a more effective means of discipline. "RJ still holds you accountable but it allows you to still be who you are as a human...it allows for the opportunity to learn from our mistakes, to be accountable for our mistakes and to restore and be forgiven."¹

Our scripture for today reminded me of Zero Tolerance versus Restorative Justice. The scripture begins by telling us what we are. "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. Stay salty, stay true to who you are. It goes on, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Use your light; don't hide it. Pope Francis puts it this way, "Jesus calls His disciples to be salt and light in the world. The person who lives and spreads the grace of Christ is salt. The person who lets the Gospel shine with good deeds is light.

"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,[a] not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called

¹ "Ejlxbi_Lessons_Learned_about_Early_Implementation_of_Restorative_Justice_in_Schools_for_distribution.Pdf," accessed February 8, 2020, https://www.iirp.edu/images/ejlxbi_Lessons_Learned_about_Early_Implementation_of_Restorative_Justice_in_Schools_for_distribution.pdf.



great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Following Jesus is not going to be easy. It will require all of our salt and all of our light. We need to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. I don't think Jesus meant to say the scribes and Pharisees were all bad. I feel that he is pointing out that we are called to go even further along the path towards God's will, God's righteousness.

What does Jesus mean when he says he has come to fulfill the law? Mathew uses the word sixteen times in his Gospel to describe how Jesus brought Scripture to life. Jesus didn't follow the scripture precisely as written; he followed the scripture by acting like God's son. "Jesus didn't recite Torah; he was Torah. In his words and in his deeds, he was the living justice, mercy, and faith of God."² Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will teach his disciples that his interpretation of the law goes even further than the Torah.

Like some other Jewish teachers of his time, he applied the principle of light and heavy to biblical commands. "As far as he was concerned, the weightier matters of the law were justice and mercy and faith."³ When Jesus healed on the sabbath, he was putting mercy ahead of the law of the sabbath. Jesus had the authority to make that distinction. He demonstrated for us his Father's priorities. Later in Chapter 5 verses 43-48 Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Will it be easy? No! It will require us to be more righteous than

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), loc 174.

³ Taylor, loc 166.



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the scribes and the Pharisees. We can only attempt such a thing with the help of Jesus, by the grace of God.

What I hear when I read this scripture is Jesus telling us that it is not enough to blindly obey the law. Jesus has come to give us more instructions. Jesus has come to teach us grace. We are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world; we are to use it. We are to use our understanding of grace to interpret the law the way God intended it, through a lens of justice and mercy.

Following the letter of the law without considering the spirit of the law, or without factoring mercy and justice, is like the school zero-tolerance policy. It doesn't help people; it just excludes them. It doesn't help the pupil or the teacher learn or improve. It doesn't enhance the community. It only encourages the student to drop out and give up. The net effect of zero tolerance was increased suspension and expulsions. There was no improvement in behavior. Children were basically thrown away.

Jesus is teaching us to honor the law but to do so with an eye for mercy and justice. This manner of honoring the law is more about relationships than it is about rules. When we honor our neighbors, when we love them as ourselves we are the salt and light of the world. We are offering to our fellow humans the grace that was freely bestowed upon us. It is not easy, and without God, it is impossible.

We are all better off, as a church, as a community, and as a country when our response to the grace of God is to share that grace with our neighbors. Amen