

**Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz**  
**“Responding (To Critics) With Fences”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, April 25, 2021**

**Proverbs 1:1-7**

*For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,  
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;  
to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—  
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,  
and the discerning acquire skill,  
to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

**Matthew 5:43-48**

*‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour 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.*

As I prepared to enter seminary long ago when I was 24 years old, my faith journey to that point was completely Jesus-centered in focus. Jesus was my Lord and Savior. That is what they had taught us in confirmation class. And so, when it came to scripture, I believed I only needed to focus my attention and my spiritual energies on the part of the Bible having to do with Jesus. I remember thinking as I signed up for the first semester of classes in seminary, that I would only take introduction to the Old Testament because I had to and because I had to get it out of the way before I could focus on the scriptural action that mattered--the New Testament's telling of the story of Jesus. Thankfully, in my early adulthood, Jesus' naiveté was quickly blown out of the theological water by an Old Testament professor who was so engaging and so exuberantly faithful that my eyes and my mind and my heart were quickly opened to the reality, kind of a very obvious reality, but a reality all the same, that Jesus was a Jew who was so deeply faithful to his Jewishness that to try to understand Him apart from Judaism was to utterly fail to grasp Jesus at all.

In short order, I learned that the real academic work before me at seminary was to grow my knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament, the writings that formed and shaped and impacted every aspect of Jesus' personal faithfulness, the writings that totally shaped his vision of God's unfolding kingdom, God's beloved community, that Jesus worked so hard in

His active ministry to make a reality. I tell this story because I believe that my misplaced understanding of Jesus, of separating Him from His Jewishness, is more commonplace amongst we Christians than we maybe admit out loud. And because of this, it is to the detriment of our discipleship. And I also tell this story because Jesus' real-time critics and competitors were constantly trying to tag Jesus as a heretic who was not a faithful interpreter of the Hebrew scriptures, and this attempt on their part to claim Him as a false prophet, to say he was a bad Rabbi. This criticism is the energy behind our gospel lesson from Matthew.

As a reminder, in this season of Easter, we're exploring Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters five, six and seven of Matthew's Gospel. The purpose of our exploration is because this sermon of Jesus' functions as a beginner's guide to Jesus and his ministry. In this guide, Jesus lays out the core spiritual values that drive and direct him as a person of faith, which are also the core values that motivate him to build God's heavenly kingdom on Earth. This beloved community is what God's heavenly realm looks like in our midst, in living color, through our real flesh and blood involvement. As we might expect, Jesus's core values, Jesus' community principles guide and shape everything in Matthew's gospel. Because these ideas are so foundational to Jesus' identity, they are vitally important to the church that has grown and developed in his name. And as church members and disciples in this day, these core values and guiding principles are in turn absolutely vital to us.

Earlier in the Fifth Chapter of Matthew, just prior to our reading, in Verses 17 through 20, Jesus addresses his critics--those who believe he does not interpret scripture faithfully. Jesus addresses these critics by telling his disciples that their righteousness, their faithfulness and ethics must exceed that of all others, especially the critics.

For Jesus, righteousness is all about ethical behavior. According to Jesus, his critics have turned the Hebrew scriptures into a rule book. The critics believe that God will be and is pleased with their behavior because they dot all the Is and cross all the Ts of the scriptural rule book.

Jesus, as you might expect, instructs his disciples very differently. He says to his disciples, and to us, it's how you act towards others and towards God that demonstrates one's faithfulness. "Follow how I interpret scripture to you," he says to his disciples, "And you will always know how to act with faithfulness."

Jesus then offers six specific interpretive examples of scripture to demonstrate what he means. Each example is built around a peculiar literary construct that comes to us from the mouth of Jesus. He says, "You have heard that it was said," then gives an example. And then the second phrase is, "But I say to you," and then he gives the gospel as he understands it.

Amy Jill Levine, a New Testament scholar and a practicing Jew, says that the construct Jesus uses is known as building a fence around the Torah, building a fence around the law, the instruction of God. Levine quotes a revered rabbinic scholar who says of this fence-building activity as a fence around a house protects what's inside, so the fence around the Torah, God's instruction, protects the commandments by creating the circumstances that make the violation of them more difficult. And then the rabbi offers an example, "If one is not angry, one is less likely to commit murder."

Our lesson today involves the sixth and final example of fence building that Jesus offers in this chapter of Matthew. In this portion of his Sermon on the Mount, He teaches we disciples to build a fence around the temptation to limit love. He builds this fence for us by instead encouraging us to love our enemies. The fence he constructs in this teaching moves the commandment to love from some theoretical plane into a very practical day-to-day reality for his disciples. Now, this is not the easiest idea for us to wrap our heads around, so let's unpack it a bit. The original instruction to love that Jesus is teaching on is found in the 19th chapter of Leviticus, the 18th verse. And there, God says, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." Jesus' critics saw their

responsibility to be limited to only loving any of your people, understood by them as your people who look like you and act like you and think like you and vote like you. They accuse Jesus of loving too freely. Imagine that being an accusation: loving too freely.

The critics view love narrowly. Only love of fellow Jews is what they understand to be commanded in this verse. But Jesus goes to the second phrase of the verse and he dares to embrace all who are neighbors as the object of God's imperative to love, which means, according to Leviticus, that all people everywhere are included in God's command, people like tax collectors and sinners and foreigners and poor people, and on and on in an endless list. All people are worthy of God's love, which means that all people are worthy of being loved by Jesus and his disciples and that all people should expect, to be loved by Jesus and his disciples. Now, Jesus' critics were all about limiting God's love. And in response to such loveless and faithless behavior, Jesus built a fence. He built a fence around God's commandment by describing in great detail how his disciples, how we are to avoid limiting love by instead loving our neighbors, all of them, every one of them without exception.

Jesus tells us, his disciples, to pray for those who make us miserable. Jesus tells us, his disciples, that only loving those who already love us is not good enough for God. Jesus tells us, his disciples, that our goal of loving others is to be like God, to be perfect. Now, Jesus knows that we will undoubtedly fall short of perfection. But still, Jesus says we must give no less in our loving of others. We must give our all, for when we give everything, when we love with total abandon, we fear the Lord, according to our Proverbs lesson. And I think a better way of fearing, instead of saying fear, we'd be better off to say we live in awe of the Lord. And when we live in awe of the Lord, we can begin to become wise. We can begin to understand how and who God has created us to be. And through our loving actions, through our loving everyone, everywhere, without exception, the world becomes more like the beloved community God intends for all.

The baptism of young Adelyn Grace that we celebrated a few minutes ago, is a great example of loving another with total abandon, as Jesus teaches us to do. While she and her family are certainly not strangers to us in this congregation, baptism is always an act of love, a holy moment when we, as a gathered community of Jesus' disciples, remember and celebrate with water and prayers and welcome God's expectation that all are included, that no one is a stranger, that love is limitless, and that love has the power to change everything.

Baptism is a sign and symbol of the practical loving that we are to extend to everyone, everywhere. And so, with this wonderful example of building God's beloved community as our model, I want us to take some spiritual homework home with us today for the week ahead. I want us to get busy making love tangible for all the loveless people and places and situations that hunger and thirst for acknowledgement and kindness and justice and equality and health and grace. We all know people and situations that we would call loveless. We know what the need is, and as disciples of Jesus, we are not just invited, we are empowered to do something about it.

We are to go, and we are to love and love and love some more. We are to love as perfectly as God loves us. Sure, we will fall short of God's perfection, but God will use our efforts and God will add to our efforts. And love will change everything. Let us go now. Let us go and build the fences of love with wild abandon and with infectious joy. Let us go following Jesus, our fence building Lord and Savior, into God's future, a future that is made real and tangible and meaningful through our loving actions. Amen.

