

## **“Unresolved”**

**Matthew 5:21-26, 33-37**

**Rev. Chris Mereschuk**

**First Congregational Church of Southampton, UCC**

**Epiphany 5A**

**February 5, 2023**

*Prayer...*

According to my mother, one of my first words was “Sure” — which is kind of a funny word for a young child to say.

“Sure” — as in, “Little Toddler Chris, do you want something to eat?”

Sure.

“Would you like a hot dog?”

Sure.

“Do you want ketchup on it?”

Sure.

Now, if you look up the definition of “sure,” you’ll find that it is meant to express a confident level of certainty: “Yes, I am sure that I am hungry, and I am sure that I would like a hotdog with ketchup on it.” But that’s when the word is used in the context of a full sentence.

Really though, as I think of it, simply responding “sure” instead of yes or no is... wishy washy. It’s non-committal. It’s like saying, “Yeah, I guess that is OK with me.”

Responding to a yes-or-no question with “Sure” conveys to me a degree of uncertainty, and that perhaps a response of “Sure” is masking some doubt or discomfort, maybe even covering the truth of what someone is thinking or feeling.

Jesus admonished his listeners: “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’ ...”

Well, it turns out toddler Chris is not much different than middle aged Chris.

“Chris, do you want to go out to dinner tonight?”

Sure.

“Can you do such-and-such for me?”

Sure.

“Are you OK with what just happened?”

Sure.

“I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

...sure.

Jesus admonished his listeners: “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’...”

With this scripture verse ringing in my ears, I have been trying to be mindful of how often I respond to a yes-or-no question with “sure.”

Now, sometimes when I respond with “sure,” I’m not being totally wishy-washy or indecisive. As someone who is prone to overthinking, there are often multiple conversations going on in my head, weighing the pros-and-cons, and my response of “sure” is more like a “soft yes” with various qualifications and considerations and maybe some mild hesitation.

But other times, my response of “sure” is masking greater hesitation, or it is an affirmative response that I feel compelled to give out of a sense of obligation, or to please someone else, or to avoid an argument or an offense — which is all really its own form of not being truthful.

“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’...”

The verses we heard today are framed as part of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Large crowds had begun to follow Jesus as word of his healing and prophetic teaching spread around “Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:25

To address this great crowd, Jesus ascended a mountain and began to teach, leading off with what we know as the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are peacemakers...” Such pronouncements of unlikely blessedness represented a reversal of societal norms and so-called common wisdom: The world praises one thing, but Jesus points us towards its opposite.

Following the Beatitudes, Jesus offers several discourses on what it means to be a disciple. While many of these at first seem to address the values and actions of the individual, they more so reinforce the interconnectedness between an individual disciple and the wider community. In the words of commentator Karoline Lewis, the Sermon on the Mount — from the Beatitudes and through the several discourses — show us that, “Who you are as a disciple is not just about you, but about you as a disciple in community.”<sup>2</sup>

Much of Jesus’s teaching in these discourses is presented as a reinterpretation of well-known law and deeply-embedded cultural norms: “You have heard it said...but I say to you...”

Jesus presents a series of lessons reinterpreting vengeful anger, grudges and conflicts that rise to the level of judicial arbitration, situations involving adultery and divorce, and finally his admonishment about swearing oaths.

Friends, an important sidebar: Note here that I have intentionally left out the verses regarding adultery and divorce from today’s reading, and have omitted that teaching from today’s sermon. I have done so because these are complex and loaded scriptures that have been interpreted and misinterpreted to shame and spiritually abuse faithful people, and the matter can only be addressed in its own focused sermon. But for today, I will note that the spirit of both teachings point us towards contemplating truth, honesty, and our accountability to others — which is the same lesson that surfaces for me when I read these teachings on anger, conflict, and the swearing of oaths.

---

<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis in [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3157](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3157)

And it is these passages about the swearing of oaths that has me really thinking about the importance of truthfulness.

It can be hard these days to know what is true, what is partially true, what is untrue, and what goes beyond untrue to deceptive and malicious lies. It seems that we must constantly and diligently search for the truth, separating the wheat from the chaff of politicking, persuasion, posturing, and propaganda. Perhaps it is true that truth is subjective to some degree or another, but deception and lies are a different matter.

In 2005, comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term “Truthiness” — which is defined as “the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts. Truthiness can range from ignorant assertions of falsehoods to deliberate duplicity or propaganda intended to sway opinions.”<sup>3</sup>

Truthiness — selected as the 2006 word of the year by Merriam Webster Dictionary — satirically names the type of not-exactly-true statement of what we wish were true, or that we might use to cover or deflect from the truth. As is often the case, there is some real truth in that humor. Truthiness gives the appearance of truth through its emotional appeal, but is often not grounded in fact or reality.

In the same way, Jesus offers an argument about the swearing of oaths — something we might not think about so much, unless we find ourselves giving legal testimony or holding certain public offices.

Jesus says do not claim that what you say or do is true based on oath you make in which you call upon God as a witness to your honesty. Do not make an oath or swear that something is true with your head — that is to say, your life — as collateral.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

“I swear to God that I’m telling you the truth!”

“May God strike me down if I’m not telling the truth!”

“I swear on my life, I’m not lying!”

Essentially, Jesus is saying that anyone who is swearing an oath in this manner is already showing you that — were it not for lethal consequences — they would, in fact, not be honest. What’s more, the performance of an oath may already be just that: a performance. The oath is a cover, a substitute for the actual truth: “I’m not sure I believe him, but he said he swears on his life, so I guess he must be telling the truth?”

On the other hand, when you consider a legal setting, the refusal to give testimony under oath points toward the same possibility of falsehood and deception!

In any case, Jesus is saying that your word needs to be truthful as it is — without the added assurance of an oath.

“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Both truth-telling and lying can be habit forming. The more you tell the truth, the easier it becomes to keep being truthful. The more you lie, the easier it becomes to lie. Telling the truth and telling a lie both require constant vigilance. The difference, of course, is that the truth does not require you to keep your story straight by fabricating more and more elaborate and deceptive tales!

“You have heard it said...but I say to you...”

Telling the truth is a radical act. Being honest and truthful are radical acts. And while we must rely on God’s help to find and sustain the courage to tell the truth, we ought not to use the power of God as a cover or substitute for the actual truth.

Jesus is urging us to live with integrity and honesty — for the sake of not only our individual discipleship, but for the sake of our relationship with others, and by extension, our relationship with God.

I glean from scripture that Jesus does not tolerate indecisiveness or half-heartedness.

Jesus said, “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’...” And later in the Book of Revelation, the likeness of Jesus as the apocalyptic Son of Man admonishes the church of Laodicea:

“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”<sup>4</sup>

Yes, careful consideration of something is important. Yes, we can hold multiple and even seemingly-contradictory things to be true. Yes, what is true in one moment or in one context can change over time and circumstance. Yet it is our commitment to seeking the truth and speaking the truth (with the help of God) that is essential to our discipleship.

When we seek what is true — true within ourselves, true in the world, true in the kin-dom of God — then we can proclaim that truth with certainty. Our words will be “Yes, Yes,” or “No, No.”

Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 3:15-16