

“YES OR NO”

6 EPIPHANY
John D. Lane

Matthew 5:33-37
Emmanuel Church

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Staunton VA

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

I spent 12 years at a parish in New Orleans. There was a woman there who could remember almost all of my sermons. Nancy would occasionally quote them back to me, even years later. My own memory of my sermons is more like the Magic Slate. Once delivered, I pull up the plastic cover and they’re gone. By Tuesday, I’m thinking about next Sunday.

If you’re like the parishioner in New Orleans, you may remember the story I’m about to tell. I don’t know whether I’ve told it here. If so, I expect you won’t remember or weren’t paying attention, probably both. The story’s true—no alternative facts—so here goes:

Many years ago, Henry Ford II, the grandson of the founder and the Chairman of the Ford Motor Company, was driving in the mountains of California and stopped by police. He was legally quite intoxicated. He was driving a Ferrari, not a Ford. He was accompanied by his mistress, not his wife. He was arrested and spent the night in jail. After he had slept it off and been bailed out by the company attorneys, he emerged to find the press waiting.

“What do you have to say, Mr. Ford?” Just before Henry II got in a car and rode off, he said, “Never complain. Never explain.” It’s become my personal mantra. Never complain. Never explain.

In October 1963 in a galaxy far, far away, my parents and I were seated in a building called The Cage, a sort of indoor dirt field with a running track, the largest building on campus. We were there to hear President Kennedy speak about Robert Frost.

At least an hour went by. Someone said there was fog at Westover Air Base delaying Kennedy’s arrival. Suddenly, there was action on the stage. A special chair appeared, and its cover removed. A Secret Service agent hung the Presidential Seal on the lectern. We could see the academic procession forming at the entrance. The march began, with the Amherst College and US Presidents bringing up the rear.

Kennedy was strikingly handsome, much more so than in photos or on television. The word charismatic definitely fit. My mother, who had grown up in a Republican family and had worked on both Eisenhower campaigns, was transfixed. About five feet tall, she stood up on her chair and absolutely hooted as JFK went by. In her remaining 34 years, she never voted for a Republican again. St. Paul on the road to Damascus had nothing on her when it came to a Conversion experience, albeit a less important one.

Kennedy got there, but he was rather late. When he began his speech, I was half expecting an apology, but none came. Later, when I read the words of Henry the Second—Ford that is—it made more sense: “Never complain. Never explain.”

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

Complaints, explanations, and excuses seem to be everywhere. It’s hard to get a Yes or No answer to much of anything.

Today’s gospel from the Sermon on the Mount is sometimes called the Six Antitheses: “You have heard that it was said ...” “But I say to you ...”

Antitheses may not be the right word. It's not this or that, either/or. Jesus doesn't come to destroy or replace the Law and the Prophets. He comes to fulfill them. He is a rabbi, a teacher, a leader of a group of disciples. He doesn't complain. He doesn't explain. He expands. He updates. He makes relevant.

For millennia, rabbis have attempted to update the lessons of scripture. My preaching professor—a guy who was so tough on us we called him “The Reamer”—beat it into us that a sermon should be 20% then, and 80% now. If this technique was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

Jesus didn't psychoanalyze Moses or speculate why Exodus and Deuteronomy are not the same. He didn't spend time figuring out how water came from the rock or how manna appeared on the ground. He didn't wonder why Matthew called it the Sermon on the Mount, while Luke called it the Sermon on the Plain.

In the Six Antitheses, Jesus' message is 20% then—“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times”—and 80% now—“But I say to you...” right now, right here. Basically, this still relates to us today.

For a variety of reasons, we live in a time of great anxiety. People are worried. A couple of weeks ago, Bizzy and I had lunch with her sister and brother-in-law. At one point he said he had 3 goals for the foreseeable future: (1) no nuclear war, (2) no civil war, (3) no economic collapse. Worthy goals.

What should we as Christians, followers of the Jesus of the Bible, do right now to live out our faith? Speak the truth in love. In opposite ways, this works against our personalities. On the one hand, there are those of us who are quick with our opinions, and often wind up offending others. This is the sub-group of which I'm a natural member. On the other hand, there are those of us who hold back our opinions because we don't want to offend others. We are all created equal, so our various ideas must be of equal value.

We've all heard, “It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something.” Or, to quote the late great philosopher W.C. Fields, “A man's got to believe in something. I believe I'll have another drink.” We need to spend some time and energy on learning the often boring facts, especially when these facts don't support our preconceptions.

We need to get together with people who are different from us. Last year's Lenten program was a good start, and I think something similar will be coming this year. The downside of that very good program was self-selection. We were a group of relatively tolerant, hopeful people, expecting a positive result. For some it might have been life-changing. How can we widen the circle of those who participate? Our Islamic friends are more nervous than they were a year ago, and for good reason. How do we reassure them?

When I was first ordained, I was curate at a parish in Charlotte. A retired man was junior warden, and a real gift to the church. He was around every day. He was also the founder of the Republican Party in that area. We were there during the Nixon years. He would get on his soapbox frequently. After a while, I'd stop him by saying, “Earl, there are two things we shouldn't talk about here: politics and religion.”

But if what we care about are politics and religion, stifling conversation is bad. We ought to find a way to talk with those with different views. This nation is too important to be left to the people in Washington. Faith is too important to be left to those who think allegiance to Jesus makes them always right. It's time to listen and time to talk.

Politics and religion are important to talk about with people you might offend. And they are important enough that you should listen carefully to those who say things that offend you. Genuine conversation can lead to genuine conversion. We need to think and argue and work together.

“Never complain. Never explain.” A wise answer for a man caught red-handed, Not so great for us today.

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