

Each Day, a Crossroads
Matthew 5:21-24, 33-37, 43-48; Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him;

for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-24, 33-37, 43-48

Jesus said, ²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

²²But I say to you

that if you are angry with a brother or sister,
you will be liable to judgment;
and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council;
and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift...

³³“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.’

³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

³⁷Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The Sermon

At the Salamanca Invitational track meet in 1993, a Cuban athlete named Javier Sotomayor was trying to break his own world record in an event called the high jump: to spring from the earth with only the energy of his own physical being and catapult himself eight feet off the ground.ⁱ

The high jump is the track event where the athlete runs up to a horizontal bar that's held up by two posts and, without any other implement, leaps over the bar.

Sotomayor took a first run, flawlessly executing a technique he had mastered over years of disciplined training.

In a familiar routine of exactly 14 strides, he took off with three short steps, built up speed over the next four, took two larger strides on steps 8 and 9, re-accelerated on the last five strides—10-11-12-13-14— and then a powerful take-off from the left leg, pumping his arms in the air.

Seven feet, 7.34 inches.

He went again, summoning the same speed and power, the same range of elevation that makes mortals like me gape with astonishment.

Seven feet, 9.70 inches.

Now he had them raise the bar to eight feet—a height no one else had ever attained.

He ran again toward the bar, jumped, and didn't make it over. Surely, what he was trying to do couldn't be possible.

He lined up one more time, looked at the bar in front of him, and got into position.

1-2-3-4-5-6-7, 8, 9, 10-11-12-13-14:

Sailing through the air, contorting his body, hurtling over the bar, he barely felt his back brush lightly against it. For a thousandth of a second, he must have wondered if the bar would come loose and disqualify his run.

But in the next thousandth of a second, he knew it had stayed securely in place, and as he landed on the mat, back to the “surly bonds of earth,”ⁱⁱ suddenly, somehow, this mortal human being, 6 feet 5 inches tall, had leapt into the air, cleared the bar, and landed safely on the other side. He still holds the world record in the high jump today.

Who would imagine that a human being can clear a bar that is set so high?

The envelope arrives in the mail, and you look at the name of the addressee to make sure it’s really to you—yep, there’s your name and address, right there on the front, in the middle.

(For young people unfamiliar with it, “mail” was a form of written communication before we had the internet.)

You hold the envelope in your hands and notice how nice it is: it’s not froofy; it doesn’t look like the junk mail which makes up the lion’s share of what you usually find in your mailbox.

You look at the return address to know you who sent it to you, and you smile at the familiarity. And you open it up and look inside, and find an invitation.

Being invited is such a warm feeling: it means you are not simply *welcome*—you are not only *free* to arrive and participate—but you are specifically *wanted*.

Your presence is seen as something that will make this event better, more enjoyable, more complete, for those who are inviting you and all those who will attend.

Jesus is now well into his astonishing ministry, and he has invited everyone who can hear him, and everyone who has heard of him, and everybody he can reach.

We are invited to come from our limited, legalistic, simplistic view of what it means to be alive and to exist in a time-limited frame of being a functioning organism,

into a recognition of who we really are. A recognition that our being here is not a cosmic accident.

A recognition that we are created, meaning we have a Creator,

and we are not a science experiment, but beloved children of a God who is love and truth, who is beyond eternity and larger than infinity, and is personally invested in how good a day you are having—you and every other beloved child of God on earth.

The invitation is to live into that reality.

It is in some way an invitation into an honest conversation between God and you.

Who is God *really* inviting you to be?

What is God *really* asking you to do?

How is God *really* inviting you to live the days that make up the years that make your human life, particularly in relation to all the other humans with whom you share this time?

“See,” says God in Deuteronomy, “I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.”

Every day, we come to a crossroads.

The law says, “Don’t murder.”

But the bar is set much higher than, “Don’t kill somebody just because you don’t like them or love them or trust them.”

Jesus says, if you are angry with one of your siblings, if you insult them, if you call them names, you are already on the path away from life, way from God.

The law says, “Don’t commit adultery,’ But the provisions of the law are a bar set very low.

Jesus says, if you’re pushing the boundaries just enough to keep yourself legally, technically covered, but still pushing that boundary—you’ve already gone the wrong way.

The invitation is to stop pretending we don’t know in our hearts when our relationships are true, and right, and mutually *good*.

The law says, “Do not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’

But Jesus says: when you say something to somebody, why would you need to seal it with an oath? If you have even minimal integrity, if you are even minimally faithful to God and to other people, why on earth or in heaven would you need to add anything to make yourself be true to your word?

The conventional wisdom says, “When anyone does anything that hurts you, make sure you even the score.”

And Jesus says: that bar is set way too low for a species made in the image of God.

You can forgive, and still find justice. You can be magnanimous and vulnerable, and still not be somebody’s punching bag. You can show mercy and have a generous spirit, and still be strong enough to know you are a beloved and worthy child of God.

The custom said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”

And Jesus said: that bar is not set nearly high enough for the kingdom of God.

But you don’t have to be Javier Sotomayor to clear it.

Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

It is an invitation to life.

Every day, we come to a crossroads, a place where we have a number of different directions we could go.

We mean to move in the direction of life, but we have a knack for setting the bar pathetically low, in terms of what it means to follow God’s teaching.

Don’t murder, don’t steal, be good to people who treat you well and don’t hate people who don’t hate you.

What do you want for that, a medal?

Who is God *really* inviting you to be?

What is God *really* asking you to do?

How is God *really* inviting you to live the days that make up the years that make your human life?

God is inviting us, imploring us, to aim higher—not just to check all the right boxes for God’s sake, but to experience the breathtaking joy of being truly alive to God’s presence in the world, and in your life, for our sake.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ I pulled all of this information from general information on the internet. I did not find it germane to this sermon to point it out, but sadly, Sotomayor’s athletic career is subject to scrutiny based on a number of failed drug tests which led to accusations that his feats were, at least to some degree, chemically enhanced.

ⁱⁱ An immortal turn of phrase from John Gillespie Magee Jr.’s sonnet, “High Flight:” *Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth / And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings....*