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Matthew 5:14-20
“Higher Standards”

So far, the Year 2011 has been the Year of Northern Africa. Think about it: first there was the election in Sudan, which in all likelihood will mean that country will split into two nations, hopefully peacefully, once the results are made official next week. Then came the surprise exit of El-Abidine Ben Ali, who'd been the dictator of Tunisia for over 23 years. Next, the president of Yemen announced he would not remain in power when his term expires in 2013, ending an iron-fist rule of over 32 years. And over the past two weeks, Egypt has been convulsed with major protests, calling for the immediate resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, who's been in power for 30 years. Tunisia is one thing, but Egypt is a much, more complicated place. There are 310,000 people in Pittsburgh, while there are 70 times more, 22 million, in Cairo. It is a nation that is about 90% Muslim, Sunni Muslim, and about 10% Christian – Coptic Christians, whose legacy of following Christ goes back longer than almost anywhere else on earth. So, who will fill the vacuum when Mubarak leaves? There are career politicians, religious leaders, and military leaders. There are secular Muslims, similar to those in Turkey, moderate Islamists, for whom democracy could be an option, and militant Islamists, who would move toward a totalitarian theocracy. You will hear the name of Mohammed el-Baradei, the former head of the Atomic Energy Agency who became famous with Hans Blix as part of the team inspecting Iraq's nuclear energy program. And you will hear contradictory things about the Muslim Brotherhood, a grass-roots organization some insist has officially renounced violence and provides much charity for poor Egyptians; but which others denounce as being extremist, hyper-critical of Israel, and opposed to democracy. There is no simple path forward for Egypt, neither for northern Africa. The best parts of the goals from various factions need to be lifted up and combined together. Only a broader, bigger vision of the future can succeed in those lands.

Now consider the setting of ancient Israel in which Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount. Although the Jewish people had been freed from exile in foreign Babylon for over 500 years, they had never been truly free in all that time. Back in Jerusalem, they had rebuilt the temple and planted their crops while living 200 years under Persian rule, 250 years under Greek rule, and now a century under Roman oppression. How were they to sing the Lord's song when foreigners sat on the throne? Some Jewish leaders, like the Sadducees, had learned to survive by collaborating with those in power. Others, like the Zealots, used violence and intimidation to undermine Rome's authority. The Pharisees were divided – sometimes acting to support Jewish nationalist movements; sometimes retreating into private lives of purity and strict adherence to the law while waiting for a future day when Yahweh would avenge the persecuted people. The crowds followed Jesus partly to hear where he stood on these issues.

So on a sunny day long ago, Jesus went up on a mountain. He began with Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And the last one was this: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way." Then he paused, looked at the group in their eyes and said, "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Blessed are you when persecuted; you are the light of the world. All that followed in his sermon was shaped by those two dynamics.

The writer Zora Neale Hurston once said, "If you want that good feeling that comes from doing things for other folks, then you have to pay for it in abuse and misunderstanding. It costs you something to do good!" There are lots of easy ways to do good – ways that are without risk, that do not involve confrontation or public exposure. But often to "do good" well means we take a stand, and yes, pay for it in abuse and misunderstanding. Part of the beauty of the Jewish law, Torah, was that it combined private and public acts of faith. Private acts – daily prayers, doing good deeds for others, especially the widow, the orphan, the stranger and outcast. But also public acts – keeping kosher dietary laws, letting one's sidelocks grow, wearing prayer shawls, not working on the Sabbath. The Jewish law says to be holy, set apart, to strive for purity, to honor traditions and commandments – of that law Jesus said, "Not one jot" – the yôd was the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet – "not one tittle" – the tittle or serif is the tiny mark that distinguishes one letter from the next – "Not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away until all is fulfilled." To those who reviled Jesus as one intent on destroying the law, Jesus emphatically denied that charge and called all to lives of righteousness like the scribes and Pharisees.

But then he went farther. You are the light of the world – let your light shine before others. Here Jesus is quoting the old prophet Isaiah, whose vision always stretched beyond the here and now to the kingdom of God waiting on the horizon. Isaiah has said to Israel, "I give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa 49:6). God's light shining to the end of the earth, to the nations. Jesus' listeners knew he was talking about Jews and Gentiles, about locals and foreigners, us and all "them." And when Jesus talked this way, he was never suggesting that everyone just bide their time until the sweet bye and bye arrives. From his first sermon, he insisted "the Kingdom of God is in your midst" (Mk 1:15). He came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, to show it in its fullness and kingdom glory here and now.

Here was something more than Sadducee collaboration. Here, in his insistence that you pray for your enemies was something more than Zealot anger. Here, in his public witness was something more than private Pharisaic piety. While there was truth in each perspective, the best parts from each needed to be lifted up and expanded. Only a broader, bigger, higher vision of the future can succeed here on earth.

Again, Zora Neale Hurston once wrote, “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to jump at the sun. We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.” Jesus started with the beatitudes, ending with the one about being persecuted. He then told people to be the light of the world, shining in good deeds and piety so that all nations, Jew, Gentile, American, North African, us, them, may give glory to God. He affirmed the beauty of Torah, challenging all to do what is right and just, particularly when that sets us apart from the muddle and compromise and sin of the world. But then the rest of his sermon was calling us to higher standards, for the kingdom of God is in our midst. You’ve heard it said, Do not murder, but I say to you, Do not be angry or insult others. You’ve heard it said, Do not commit adultery, but I say to you, Do not lust and demean and abuse others. You’ve heard it said, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” but I say to you, Do not strike back when struck, and walk the second mile with those in need. You’ve heard it said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” but I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute.”

I don’t know what the crowd thought when Jesus laid before them these higher standards. When he pointed at the sky and said jump, get off the ground; when he said, be a light for the entire world. At the very least, it meant for them to put their faith into practice. Not legalistically. Not carefully or only when it was convenient. But boldly, totally, like a leap at the sun, like burning brightly from the top of a hill.

The apostle Paul struggled was faced with articulating this bold, new vision to his audience of Jews and Gentiles. So he said, point-blank to both groups, “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24). I know that the church has chosen communion as one way to articulate these higher standards – a time when we remember Christ dying on a cross out of love for all humankind, knowing that it costs something to do good. When we remember Jesus and his disciples as a fellowship that preceded and then thankfully reconvened after the sad event of a public crucifixion. It is a meal in which we take in something real; we enact something tangible and public; we step into a glimpse of the kingdom of God that is in our midst and hold ourselves to higher standards.

Higher standards for the people of northern Africa – justice, democracy, freedom. Higher standards for the people of North America – justice, true democracy, equality and compassion. How do we get to those higher standards? By following the one who is the way forward and the way higher. It’s like the old hymn, “Love lifted me, love lifted me; when nothing else could help, love lifted me.” By grace and love, so much is possible. By grace and love, so much needs to be done. By grace and love, we will begin today – together – right here. Thanks be to God.

AMEN