



It is no small task to build a fence.

There's the manual labor of it first of all.

You've probably got to use a post-hole digger

and whether you're

rolling out chain link fencing

or putting up panels of wooden pickets,

there is always a reason for your fence.

You remember that saying,

good fences make good neighbors

...maybe you'd build a fence

to mark your property line.

Maybe you build a fence to keep your pets

or small children, in the yard.

Maybe you've put up a chicken wire fence

around your garden

so, the rabbits and deer

won't eat all your lettuce.

Some of you know this,

but if you are planning to put in a pool,

you have to have some sort of fence or barrier

around the area for safety.



This past August

a woman was sentenced

to 7 days in jail and fined \$1,000
for stepping off the boardwalk,
where this is no fence,
in Yellowstone National Park.¹

She and two others were charged
with walking on thermal grounds
—which is extremely dangerous.
The most dangerous points along the boardwalk
do have a fence—
for our protection from the
geothermal pool and acidic mud pots
and to protect Yellowstone’s fragile ecosystem.

So, it seems fence building mostly
has to do with protection—
whether it is a home
or vegetables
or active geysers;
whether it is keeping things and critters out
or keeping things and critters in
and though it is hard work to put up a fence,
in the end fences are usually
keeping us **out of and protecting us from**
trouble.

Which is a great segue to our passage this morning
and if you don’t see quite the connection
between fences and our continued look
at Jesus’s sermon on the mount
—well, keep in mind
I still have about 10-ish minutes
or so left to preach.



¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/27/us/yellowstone-hot-springs-woman-sentenced.html>

As Whit mentioned last Sunday,
we are on week 2
our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount
in the gospel of Matthew.
And last week the sermon
on the Sermon on the Mount
covered the upside down
and therefore, right-side up
look at the world through the Beatitudes.
But the Sermon on the Mount
covers more ground than you think;
it spans Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7.

And because it spans that many chapters
scholars pretty much know
that Matthew combined
several of Jesus' sermons or teachings
into what we call the Sermon on the Mount.
So, while we often read
or think of this
as one continuous (and might I add, long) sermon,
it isn't likely that all of this
was preached at one time.
AJ Levine says, "Had Jesus delivered all verses
in Matthew 5-7 at one time,
the disciples' heads would have exploded."²
There's just too much going on
in these chapters for it to be one lesson.³

And not only is there too much going on,
we are also not going to read
all of Matthew 5:21-37
—rather I'm going to read several couplets
from those verses,
commonly called the Antitheses.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 2020) pg. xi

³ *Ibid*, pg. xi

And now church, hear a word from the Lord,

²¹You have heard 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 judgement;
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.

²⁷You have heard that it was said,
'You shall not commit adultery.'

²⁸But I say to you that everyone
who looks at a woman with lust
has already committed adultery with her
in his heart.

³¹"It was also said,
'Whoever divorces his wife,
let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

³²But I say to you
that anyone who divorces his wife,
except on the ground of unchastity,
causes her to commit adultery;
and whoever marries a divorced woman
commits adultery.

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.

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.



For years, it has plagued me
that right before we hear Jesus
issue all these, *antitheses*,
all these, *you have heard it said*,
but I say to you...
it has bothered me
that right before all that he says,

“Do not think
that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;
I have come not to abolish
but fulfill.
For truly I tell you,
until heaven and earth pass away,
no one letter,
not one stroke of a letter,
will pass from the law
until all is accomplished.” (Mt. 5:17-18)

Because it sounds like
you are kind-of abolishing the law,
if I'm honest, Lord.
Is he really *fulfilling* the law,
because it sounds like
he's just making the law harder!
But what he's actually doing
is extending the law.
He's fulfilling the Torah
by drawing it out to its full implications.⁴

Jesus is extending the law
out past murder to anger;
past adultery to lust;
past divorce to sticking to your bonds
because vows were made;
and out past swearing oaths
to letting simple honesty.



This fulfilling that Jesus does,
is getting to the core values of the commandments.
And by following the commandments,
as Jesus interprets them,
(or reinterprets them, we could say)
his disciples walk
as if they have one foot
already in the kingdom of heaven.⁵

Let me tell you a short and medium short parable.
There is a short Jewish parable
where God mourns over the way
humanity is acting

⁴ Ibid, pg.24

⁵ Ibid, pg. 27

and God, in tears,
turns to the heavenly host and says,
“Oh, how my children remember me
but forget my ways.
How I wish they would forget about me
and keep my ways.”⁶

In a way,
that illustrates the sentiment
that Jesus is getting at
by extending the commandments.
Whenever you outline something
or define it,
by nature, it becomes defined only
in its relationship to other things.
So, a rule or law or a commandment
can easily become rigid
because it is by nature
set as a prohibition or protection
against something else.
And don't most of us like
clear, and concise outlines, boundaries, and rules?

This means that following the law,
the commandments, the rules,
following the Torah,
becomes increasingly important;
and not only that,
it becomes easier
than following the intent behind the rules,
the commandments, the law.

Does that make sense?

What we hear in Matthew's gospel
is Jesus addressing the intent,
the core or the meaning
of certain aspects of the Torah
—therefore, extending them beyond
just the rigid, black and white face value of the Jewish law.

⁶ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic: And Other Impossible Tales* (Paraclete Press, Brewster Mass. 2015) Third Ed. Pg.97

Now a medium short story by Pete Rollins
that helps illustrate the extensions of Jesus
that get at the intent
behind the Torah
and the allure to follow it
too rigidly.



There was a small town
that was filled with believers
who always sought to act in obedience
to the teachings of God.
The town leaders would often pray,
and search the scriptures for guidance and wisdom
whenever a difficult situation arose.

But late one wintry evening
a young man from a neighboring city
fled to this small town
and went to the church seeking refuge.
The church's caretaker,
an older man of deep faith
took him in, gave him some food and warm clothing.

The young man explained that he fled his town
because the authorities had labeled him
a political dissident.
It turned out that the young man

had been rather critical
of both the local government
and the church in his work as a journalist.

Deciding that they would need a plan,
the caretaker invited the young man
to stay in his home
while they worked out what to do next.
But it was a small town.

And word got out
that the caretaker was harboring this young man.
So, the priest and local authorities
got together and prayed
and discussed what needed to be done.

They decided that the young man
ought to be handed over
to the government authorities
and face up to the crimes he had committed.
The caretaker protested saying,
“he hasn’t committed a crime
—he just spoke out
against what he believed to be injustices
perpetrated by authorities
in the name of God.”

You can imagine
there was lots of discussion back and forth.
The longer the caretaker took care of the young man,
the more the town feared
for its own safety
should the government authorities
find out where the young man was.

The caretaker kept insisting
that the young man was his guest
and that while he was staying
under the caretaker’s own roof,
the caretaker himself
was going to ensure

that no harm came to the young man.
“If you take him by force,” the caretaker explained,
“I will publicly attest
to having helped him
and suffer the same injustice as my guest.”



The church caretaker
was a beloved member of the community
and the town’s leaders
had no intention
of letting something happen to him.

So, this time the priest and town leaders
went searching the Scriptures
for guidance.

They came back to the caretaker
and told him they’d spent several nights
searching the Scriptures for discernment
about what to do
and we see, they told him,
that it says that we must respect the authorities
and witness to the truth of faith
by submitting to them.

But the caretaker also knew the Scriptures well
and replied that they also said
that we were to care for those
who suffer and are persecuted.

The leaders and priest grew desperate.
They prayed and prayed.
They prayed like they never had prayed before

and begged God to speak to them
—not in a still small voice,
but clear and direct
like God had spoken to Abraham and Moses.
Well, their pray worked.



The sky darkened,
the foundations of the earth shook
and God descended from heaven
and spoke to all of them saying,
“the priest and elders are right my friend.
In order to save the town
this man must be handed over.”

But the caretaker, a man of deep faith,
looked up to heaven and replied,
“If you want me to remain faithful to you, my God,
then I can do nothing but refuse your advice.
For you have already written
that I must protect this man,
a fellow creature of your own making,
at all costs, for he is a brother.
Your words of love
have been spelled out by the lines of his face
and your word is found
in the texture of his flesh.
So, my God, I defy you,
precisely in order
to remain faithful to you.”

With this,
God turned to the priest and town leaders and said,

“If I cannot convince him,
then neither will you.
Now, leave him in peace.”
Then God smiled,
quietly withdrew
knowing that his intentions
had been followed.⁷



Wasn't that slightly unsettling?
Good parables always are.

This parable pushes past following of the rules
for the sake of following the rules,
and instead invites us to dig deeper
to look at the heart
of the why
of the rules.

This story gets at the intention,
the core, the heart of God's law.
That is what Jesus is doing
by extending these commandments.
He is pushing the rules
past memorization and rigidity
into the space of discernment and purpose
—he is taking the boundary
set up by the rule
and moving further out.

He is doing what good Jewish rabbis often did
—he is building a fence around the Torah.⁸

This term,

⁷ Ibid, story adapted from pgs. 94-97, *The Orthodox Heretic*

⁸ Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 2020) pg.28-9

building a fence around the Torah,
was used by rabbi's
to protect the beauty and sacredness
of God's law.

Building a fence around the Torah,
protects commandments
by creating circumstances
that make more difficult to violate.⁹

Listen again to Jesus first antithesis,
his first extension;

“²¹You have heard it was said
to those of ancient times,
'You shall not murder...'
²²But I say to you that if you are angry
with a brother or sister,
you will be liable to judgement...”

Jesus is building a fence around the law against murder,
making it harder to violate,
making it harder to even get to murder
because now you have to
deal with anger first.
In other words, if you are not angry,
you are less likely to commit murder.¹⁰



A fence protects.
A fence keeps things out or holds things in.
A fence around God's law,
means that it holds the holiness in

⁹ Ibid. pg. 29

¹⁰ Ibid. pg.29

—while protecting us
from transgressing each other and God.
Most of us can easily say,
'well, I'd never murder anyone...'
but not one of us can say
that anger hasn't led to
broken trust or damaged relationships
and painful situations.

This rabbi who sat down to teach his disciples,
is building a fence, not only for them
but also, for us.

He is pushing them,
he is pushing us
to think past just what we see
and get to what God sees.

It is again, that upside down and therefore right-side up
marker for the kingdom.

My people remember me
but forget my ways,
how I wish they would forget me
and remember my ways.

Building a fence is not easy,
but here is our Lord,
helping us with the intent of our hearts,
so that we might be followers of his law,
with one foot already in the kingdom.

Benediction

Fences require upkeep, don't they?
This means that as followers of Christ
we need to be able,
to reinterpret and reexamine
the laws, the rules, the commands we know
to make sure God's intent
of love, justice, and mercy
are God's unchanging word
that remains in our hearts.