**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**February 20th, 2022**

**A Rule of Life**

1. Following on…

This text follows from our text last week as the Sermon on the

Plain. It is another tough sermon, both for the ears of the disciples then and the disciples today.

I was reading about our text today and Rev. Crowe-Tipton make a stark but important metaphor. She said that, “congregations respond to this text in the same way my children respond to seeing cooked spinach on their plate at dinner. No matter how much I explain the nutritional value, no one around the table really wants to dig in.” But in this text, “Jesus focuses on the real problem with nutrition; that there is a vast difference between what we want and what we need.”

So, yes, this is a spinach of a text – this is one of those texts that both pastors and congregants look at and say, “Nice idea, but difficult in practicality.” Yet, Jesus is telling us again what we need, not what we want, so as we begin to illuminate this text, we do so knowing that these words are not necessarily ones that we want to hear.

1. Golden Rule

Many of these ideas we are familiar with and have heard from

Sunday school classrooms or from parents or elsewhere – the Golden Rule – Love your enemies, do unto others as you would have done to you.

It sounds lovely in speech, but how do I even begin to love my enemies? I’m fortunate that I am a woman who doesn’t have many enemies, but I definitely have a few people on my, ‘I’m not so keen on you’ list. Can I be kind to them? Sure. Can I treat them with respect? Sometimes a challenge, but okay. Can I love them? Now, now that’s asking a lot.

But Jesus makes an important point here when he says, “if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” and fair enough. We gravitate towards people who we have shared interests and loves and when we agree and are able to love one another, that’s pretty easy. Yet Jesus says anyone can do that – what I need you to do is to take the higher road. I need you to love even when that’s hard, because you are my child and I have shown you mercy, so you are called to show mercy to others.

Right, there’s the spinach – I don’t like it, but it’s what we need to do and it’s good for us to do, because if we preach about this life in Christ, we have to be examples of Christ in the world.

1. Turn the other cheek

The real spinach that I find most difficult is this idea of ‘turning the other cheek.’ This is part

of the tension we found last week – remembering that Jesus is calling us to live differently, but not at the expense of our souls. When we hear this call to turn the other cheek, it is easy to see it as a passive response to violence and evil, even a prescription for perpetuating abuse.

This week though, I’m looking with a slightly different lens at the words. Those who are hearing this message are believers, whether back then or right now – we know Christ, we have seen Christ’s work and we are compelled by it to live differently. While we aren’t called to violence and abuse, we do need to realize that our lives will require us to live counter-intuitively to the culture that surrounds us.

When we get hit by a blow, by a terrible word or a literal jab, it doesn’t mean we need to stand there, but we don’t punch back. We teach this to our children, and if we teach this to them, then we need to be examples. We can walk away, we can say, ‘No’ and we can tell this person or persons that we aren’t going to respond to their violence with violence. And that can be hard to do when emotions are high and adrenaline is running through your system, but the strength of the Spirit leads us to take a different road – one of example, one of love, and one that says that our lives are focused upward to the Kingdom.

1. Gift giving

One of the concepts that is also shared in this rule of life that Jesus presents in his sermon is

this idea that we should give and not anticipate receiving anything in return. Particularly in the culture back then, this was difficult because so much of life involved bartering and trading. It was only the wealthy individual that could be so free to give and not receive. The word for the disciples of Jesus’ day is that your reward is in heaven, so act like the wealthy here, and give without constraint.

I know I’m probably in the minority here, but gift getting and giving has always been a strange concept for me. There’s this notion that there are different kinds of presenting and receiving love and one of those ways is in the giving and receiving of gifts. That’s not my love language, though I am grateful for a gift, for me, it is in how you experience life with me and our conversations and interactions.

Yet, for some folks, this is really important. It isn’t a materialistic notion, but it is a physical and tangible way to show love and receive love. That should not be undersold or under misunderstood. If you know someone in your life who shows love this way – make sure to note it, because it is important for them to know they are loved.

But for the purposes of this text, Jesus tells us not to expect anything in return when we give, for our gift is God, our gift is the Kingdom, our gift is eternal life. What we receive is love from God and the acknowledgement that we are following Jesus’ example of freely offering our things and ourselves.

It is not just about the shirt off your back though, it’s also goes back to that way of living, the golden rule. If you forgive someone, do not expect them to forgive you too if the errors are on both sides. This call, this rule of life that Jesus presents, is one that will push you, challenge you, and keep you creatively considering what it means to be part of the body of Christ living a life of faith.

1. Lighting the Candle

Something that I’ve been meditating on all week as I’ve considered this text is a quote from

James Keller as he was imprisoned. He wrote, “When you light another’s candle, you lose nothing of your own – you just produce more light.” Hear that again, “When you light another’s candle, you lose nothing of your own – you just produce more light.”

Let’s take this metaphor and say, your life is a candle that is burning brightly. It burns by the way you interact with one another, by the love you show to those who deserve it and those who do not, and living out these Spinach texts that we hear throughout the Gospels and Scripture as a whole. That light burns within you and when you are able to extend mercy, love, and grace to others, you shine a light in the darkness.

Something I try to remember and I have written on my white board at home is, “Everyone has a story.” We are complex – we have a history, we have worries and dreams and hopes and fears and so many experiences that contribute to us being who we are. I try to remember that sometimes, when someone is rude or dismissive or mean, maybe there’s a part of their story that I don’t know that caused them to respond unkindly. It doesn’t excuse poor actions, but it helps me to love my neighbor better and more graciously.

So when I’m living in this world, remembering that we all have our stories and experiences. I acknowledge that when I extend love or that light to someone else – that might be the light that changes things. It might be a spark in someone’s world to think differently, to see that mercy is possible in a world that is sometimes merciless. When I am able to light someone else’s candle, I still burn brightly, but now they do too, and that love and light is passed on far beyond what I can imagine.

Take these rules, this sermon of Jesus’ that is hard to swallow and live it out as a disciple. We know that this is what our world needs, not necessarily what our emotions want. May you also seek, by living out these rules, to light a flame within someone else, to guide them and show them by example, so that the light spreads and spreads and love burns brightly. Amen.