**“Beyond Belief”**

Luke 6:1-11, 46-49

April 23, 2017, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

This past week a study came out which suggested that there may be, may be, a link between drinking diet sodas and other calorie free beverages and an increased risk of a stroke and dementia and possibly Alzheimer’s disease. The study did not say there was a direct or causal connection, only that there was perhaps some correlation in a small percentage of people. This is yet another piece of information and advice on what to do and what not to do if we want to live a long and healthy life.

For the next few weeks we are going to spend our time in Luke 6. Simply put Luke 6 is a concentrated teaching on *the best way to live according to Jesus.* If you have ever read or heard of the Sermon on the Mount, Luke 6 contains much of the same material, but the message is shorter and the setting is different. So in the coming weeks we will try to understand what Jesus means when He says things like, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you,” (Luke 6:27) and “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Luke 6:41)

However, for today I want to look at just the beginning and the end of the chapter. When we look at the first part of the chapter and the last part of the chapter we discover that even though Jesus wants to show us the best way to live, we don’t always want to know what it is and we don’t always want to do it. This is what Jesus warns us about at the end of the chapter. After He has said all that He wants to say, after He has carefully described in detail how God wants us to live, He brings it all to a close with a powerful question: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” In other words why do you listen to what I have to say and then do what you want? Why do you act like you want to obey Me and then not follow through? And then He tells that story about two men who each built a house. One man dug deep and built his house on the rock. The other man did no such thing. Then a storm came and the house on the rock stood. The other house was washed away and the man lost everything.

Jesus says He knows the best way to live. The question is do we want to know what He knows? And do we want to do what He says? To get us started and help us to deepen this question a bit I want to take a closer look at how the chapter begins.

It begins with two stories about what it means to keep the Sabbath. The commandment to honor the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments and it was something the Jewish people took very seriously. In fact in the Old Testament breaking the Sabbath was punishable by death (Exodus 31:14ff)

In the first story Jesus and the disciples are walking through some fields of grain, perhaps wheat or barley. It is probably after the harvest and they are simply gleaning some of the leftover crops as they walk along. But it is the Sabbath and you are not supposed to do even that on the Sabbath. When this is pointed out to Jesus He reminds them of a time when King David was on the run with his men. David and his men were desperately hungry. And they came to one of the sanctuaries at that time. David asked the Priest if there was anything to eat. The Priest replied that the only food he had was the consecrated bread that was not to be eaten by anyone except the priests. But David asked for, and was given that bread. The point of the story is that sometimes human need is more important than what the law says. Under the circumstances David and the Priest did the right thing, even though it was against the “law.”

Jesus makes the same point in the next story. Again it is the Sabbath. This time Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand. We know Jesus can heal him. But will He do it on the Sabbath? Those who want to accuse Him are waiting to see. So Jesus stands the man up in front of everyone and asks, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” This is the key to the whole conversation and they all know the answer. It’s the same point made in the previous story. Human need is more important than Sabbath law. And they know it; His accusers know it. They just don’t want to admit it.

Let me tell you why I know this. I have a quote. It is from a commentary on the meaning of the Law as it was practiced at the time of Jesus. A Rabbi wrote, “Whenever you find a positive commandment and a negative commandment contradicting, if you can fulfill both of them, it is preferable; but, if not, *let the positive supersede the negative*.” So take the scene I just described. One command says to heal on the Sabbath is a kind of work, so don’t do it. But another teaching commands us to show compassion to those in need. One command is negative. Don’t heal. Don’t do it. But there is another command, which is just as important, if not more important, and it is positive: show compassion. These two are in conflict. You can’t fulfill them both. So which one should you fulfill? The rabbis concluded you should show compassion. That’s the positive commandment and according to their own teaching it should take precedence over the command to rest on the Sabbath. So Jesus heals him.

By the way I discovered this week that there is an ancient, non-biblical document that adds a bit to this story. It says that the man was a stone-mason and that he had injured his hand in his work and if it wasn’t made better he could not work and he and his family would starve. Again, according to Jesus human need trumps religious or ceremonial law. (*Chronicles of the Messiah*, p.340)

And I’m convinced that those who wanted to accuse Jesus knew it. They knew it, but they didn’t want to hear it. Jesus was showing them what to do. He was trying to teach them the best way to live *according to their own laws*, but they didn’t want to hear it.

This is the question the chapter poses to us. Jesus wants to teach us the best way to live, but do we want to hear it? Do we really want to know? And so, again, the chapter comes to a close with that powerful question. Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”

I want to leave you with a story that may help us to reflect on this question in the coming days. This is one of my stories. I think it is one of the first two stories I ever wrote, probably sometime in the mid 1980’s. After all the years I keep coming back to it for what I think it is trying to teach me. As I do each time I share one of my stories, I need to tell you that I see them as a little bit like Jesus’ parables, Aesop’s fables, and the Twilight Zone. This one is called “The Toe in the Mirror.”

Once there was a rich man who entertained himself by collecting things. One day in an antique store he was attracted to what appeared to be a large, full-length mirror. He couldn’t be sure because all he could see was the frame. What he thought was most likely a mirror was almost entirely covered with heavy canvas. Pinned to the canvas was a faded piece of paper that read “Do Not Remove.” He called for the owner of the store.

“What this is and why is it covered up?” he asked. He was used to getting his way.

“You won’t believe me,” came the reply.

“Tell me anyway,” he said. Again, he was used to getting his way.

“Well,” continued the owner, “under the canvas is a mirror, and the story is that this mirror will only reflect the part of you that is alive in God. I keep it covered up because it’s bad for business. Too many people don’t see what they expect to see.”

“You let people look if they want to?”

“Of course, and some do, because they don’t believe me. Once they look they tend to leave in a hurry without buying anything. As I said, it’s bad for business.”

“May I look?”

“If you wish.”

He thought for a moment. Then, reassured by the knowledge that his church pledge up to date, he peeled the canvas aside, and stood in front of the mirror.

“I don’t see anything!” he said, wondering immediately if the light was bad.

“There’s always been something before,” said the owner, sympathetic from a certain amount of practice in such situations. “Look again.”

He looked up and down the mirror. Sure enough there was something there.

Down in the corner, near the bottom, like a lonely radish, was his big toe.

“My toe,” he mumbled, “that’s all there is.”

“That’s all for now.”

“You mean it can change?”

“So some say.”

“How much for the mirror?”

The owner wasn’t all that unhappy to see the mirror go.

The collector took the mirror home with him. Many times each day he stood in front of the mirror, but nothing ever changed. The big toe of his left foot was all he saw. He tried everything he knew to change it. He stood in front of the mirror in a $2000 hand tailored suit. He stood there with all his bank and investment statements. Nothing. He stood there with his award from a service club for his help during their last fundraiser. He paraded in front of the mirror holding a certificate of dismissal from a highly respected psychotherapist. He offered it a newly earned Master of Divinity degree from an accredited seminary. Zip. Zero. No response, nothing but that single big toe.

At last, in a kind of desperation, he gave most of his money away. When he finished he thought he detected a small change in the image of his toe; but a closer examination revealed that it was only that his toenail needed clipping.

Finally there was nothing left for him to pursue, and nothing left to let go of. He had no more ideas, nothing more to offer the mirror. Still, he could not stop looking at it and thinking about it. In his helplessness he broke down in front of the mirror and cried. He wept for his weakness and his emptiness. He wept out of frustration and he wept for reasons he couldn’t begin to explain.

Then, in the next moment, because of something inside him, but also because of something that entered him, he let go. His heart opened not to how he desired to know the Mystery of the mirror, but to how the Mystery of the mirror desired to be known. His eyes were so full of tears that he did not notice, dimly at first, and then with greater and greater definition, his other toe, foot, feet, legs, arms, torso, shoulders, neck and head filling up the mirror.

Why tell this story? Well, for me it’s about surrender and I think that’s what Jesus wants to talk to us about here in Luke 6 and everywhere. Do we want to know where we are giving our life away to things that do not matter? And do we really want to know how to truly embrace the things that do matter according to Jesus?

Let me close with another reason I chose this story for this morning. Pastor Herman isn’t here today. He’s down at Lucasville Maximum security prison on a Kairos weekend, bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the incarcerated. And while I am not there I know what is happening. If the mirror in the story actually existed, and the men at Lucasville stood in front of it, I would imagine that most of them wouldn’t expect to see a thing, not even their big toe. But I know without a doubt that right now, in Lucasville, there are men for whom the mirror is filling up. Because of the love of Jesus and the Kairos team, perhaps for the first time in their life, they are beginning to see themselves as loved and accepted by God. And in response they are declaring to Jesus that they want to follow Him and they want to build the remainder of their life, even in prison, on the solid foundation of His life and teaching.

How about us? Why should we want anything less?