

“You have heard it said”: script, counterscript
Matthew 5

“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.” Six times in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeats this refrain as he teaches his disciples. “You know the script...and I offer you a counterscript.”

As we begin our new year, we too will repeat this refrain. And as we do, it is my hope and my prayer that we first of all listen for the voice of Jesus. That we listen for the Spirit of God stirring in us, speaking the scripts and revealing the counterscripts into our ears, into our collective ears.

Following Jesus, being a Christian, is about living from revelation, expecting God to be revealed, expecting God to reveal what we haven't been able to see or hear. As Jesus calls his disciples, he says to them, “Come and see.” As people *experience* Jesus, things hidden are revealed, and their blindness is healed. In his healing, again and again, Jesus embodied and revealed God's Good News of, “I say to you.” And with those words and with Jesus' very being, people experienced liberation from the merciless laws that had been binding and oppressing them.

So, just as Jesus begins his teaching (according to Matthew) with the refrain, “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you,” so we begin our year by listening to Jesus' teaching. What do we hear? What is Jesus saying? What is he *not* saying?

Script/counterscript—the Good News of a counterscript

In this Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says, “You have heard it said,” he's identifying some of the scripts they're living with, the scripts that have been forming them for generations. These are the laws that have governed their living. Jesus is, of course, quoting from the 10 Commandments, the Law that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This isn't just

any script, it's holy *Scripture*, sacred Scripture. You have heard that it was said: Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Love your neighbor.

These are good scripts. We need to be clear that Jesus is not erasing the script. He is not re-writing Scripture, or writing new Scripture. He says so himself, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Mat 5.17).

So when Jesus offers a counterscript, saying, “But I say to you,” he isn't saying, “These old laws are worn out and no longer any good or valid.” No. The counterscripts that Jesus gives aren't throwing Scripture away. When Jesus says, “But I say to you” he isn't giving them something better or newer that replaces something out-of-date. No. What Jesus is doing is revealing the fullness of the script, the fullness God's Law.

With the refrain, “But I say to you,” Jesus is revealing and speaking what God's law has been from the beginning. God's Law is, and has always been, a living Law. A Law of Love that seeks the health and well-being of all bodies—human bodies, creaturely bodies, the body of Earth. They aren't scripts that dictate the morality and ethics of single bodies but instead, counterscripts are *for* life and aliveness, counterscripts for the collective body of humanity and creation, so that *all* can flourish and grow *together*.

The Law/ *torah* revealed

One of the scripts of Christianity through the generations has been that Jesus gets rid of the “old law.” And, at the surface, it *is* what we hear NT *Scripture* saying. Paul, in Romans 7:6, for example: “But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” Or Jesus, at the last supper says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luk 22:20).

So we have to be alert and pay attention. The Good News of Jesus' counterscript isn't an easy or simplistic understanding that the "old" is bad and the "new" is good. In fact, if we come to the Sermon on the Mount with an assumption that the "old" law is bad and Jesus' words are something new and different, then we will incorrectly hear and assume that the Sermon on the Mount is a brand new thing. But if we listen for revelation, we'll hear that the Beatitudes are echoing Scripture. The pattern of the beatitudes, "happy/blessed are" is used frequently in the Psalms and the content of the Beatitudes simply summarize the themes that are at the heart of the Law found throughout Hebrew Scripture.

What Jesus is doing is breathing life back into God's Law. Through time God's Word had become reduced to rigid systems and regulations to obey. The Law that was intended for the liberation and healing of a people had, over time, turned into arbitrary rules that benefitted the privileged and confined and crippled the poor and vulnerable. The living Law that was given to a people at Mt. Sinai had turned to stone, reduced to a list of rules to obey, or fail to obey.

These kinds of rules are necessary for children and teenagers. Developmentally, they need their parents and community to say yes or no, to tell them what is right or wrong. But by the time we're in our early 20s, we begin to have the capacity to understand that life is complicated and doesn't fit into easy right/wrong judgments. And we are developmentally prepared to deal with the nuances and complexities of life. But if, as adults, we live governed by rules written for children, many will feel suffocated and bound.

And this is how people were experiencing God's Law. Through time, by wanting to protect the living Law, people had instead institutionalized it and what they were following had lost its life. There was no longer room for the Spirit of God to breathe and blow and create anew.

This is exactly the thing that Jesus understands and teaches. And he creates space for the Spirit, for people to see and experience the breath and aliveness of the Spirit.

The Good News isn't a one-size-fits all book of instructions. Nor is it a static set of rules and regulations. The Law of God is living. It's alive. It's for the health and well-being of collective bodies. So as Jesus has been moving about in the community, he's been looking and listening. And now, rather than simply reciting the scripts they all know so well, he is, instead, translating Scripture into the context of their lives and circumstances. And in Jesus' counterscript, his listeners hear of a God who loves them, a God who has loved them from the beginning. The law written in stone rejected the blind, the lame, the diseased, the vulnerable, the poor. "But I say to you. God loves you. No matter what your health, no matter what your condition, God has always loved you." And they experience the healing of God's love. Time and again, Jesus tends to wounds, pain, and brokenness with the counterscript that God desires healing and liberation for *all* bodies, that God *sees* and *loves* all bodies, especially the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed.

Into the brokenness and diseases and wounds of our lives, Jesus speaks the Good News that God is a God of life. That God is a God of love. That God is a giving and forgiving God. That God's life and love and grace are here and now, for us as a human body, and for all creation to thrive and flourish.

This size of a God that Jesus is revealing cannot be captured by rules written in stone! When Jesus speaks, "But I say to you," he's revealing a living God that is always breathing and creating new life from our wounds and pain and death. The God that Jesus is revealing is not a rule giver but a Creator and Lover of life. In all its messiness, in all its complexity, in all its pain and difficulty, the Spirit of God is *with* us and *for* us.

On earth as in heaven – partners and participants

When Jesus speaks, “But I say to you,” he’s offering the Good News of a counterscript that speaks of God’s Law as a living Law that seeks healing and wholeness for all creation. “But I say to you” that God’s Word is a living Word that is always blowing and breathing new life, that is calling forth new life in places of oppression and injustice. Into a time when the poor and vulnerable, the sick and marginalized were oppressed not only by empire but also by their own religious institutions, Jesus speaks a counterscript of a kingdom of God, on earth as in heaven. Where the laws of empire are intended to oppress and suppress, the Law of God’s kingdom is intended for healing and thriving, beginning with the poor, the orphans, the most vulnerable.

When Jesus says, “But I say to you,” he’s teaching not only the fullness of the Law, but he’s also revealing to his listeners that we human beings are partners and participants in God’s kingdom, in God’s living Law. The kingdom of God isn’t up in the sky somewhere, nor is it in the future. God’s kingdom is here, now, on earth. And God is here, with us, a loving God, a merciful God. God is *with* the poor, the sick, the oppressed. God has always been present, blowing and breathing life, healing and liberating us with love and life.

The Spirit of God is always and forever a creating and life-giving Spirit. And so when Jesus says, “You have heard it said: you shall not murder. But I say to you: beware of being angry with your fellow human beings,” he isn’t giving a new rule that says, ‘Thou shalt not be angry. No. He’s expanding the scope and fullness of the law. It isn’t enough to just not kill each other. “But I say to you, pay attention to your emotions and the conditions that would cause you to commit murder. Be responsible for how you use your anger so that you aren’t inflicting pain onto others.” Let me repeat: Jesus isn’t saying: You shall not be angry. Jesus was a human being and he understands the complexity of emotions. So he’s telling us to pay attention and tend our anger. If our anger is being tended with the Spirit of God, it can

burn—burning and destroying systemic oppression and violence. We see this anger burning in the #MeToo movement and in the protests against violence and racism. Tended anger has the power and energy to burn down structures that oppress and violate.

The Sermon on the Mount teaches us to pay attention. It teaches us *how* to pay attention so that *we can participate and engage with God* in the creation of a kingdom on earth as in heaven, a living and loving, thriving and flourishing humanity and creation. What we hear in Jesus' counterscript is that it isn't enough if I have followed the letter of the law. If I haven't been paying attention to others and someone is hurt in any way—physically, emotionally, spiritually—because of my actions and attitudes, then I have broken God's living Law and am guilty. Too many of us are following laws written in stone, not seeing all the bodies being broken and oppressed in the wake of our systems in action. And we are guilty of breaking God's Law.

“You have heard it said, You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you if you objectify a woman, you have already committed adultery.” This script and counterscript are being played out on a national stage. There are those arguing, “There is no evidence that he violated this woman so he is not guilty.” And in response we hear the collective pain of women who have been violated through the ages crying out. The voices of women and their allies are shouting, “But I say to you if you diminish or disrespect even one woman you are guilty not only of adultery but also of assault and sexual violence.

When we are paying attention to the life and aliveness of God's spirit, we see the counterscript that is being spoken across the nation. Generations have been formed by listening to Jesus' refrain, “You have heard it said.... But I say to you.” *And we are hearing* the Spirit of God breathing a new counterscript, a counterscript for this place and time in

history: “But I say to you, value black and brown bodies, honor the bodies of women and children, respect the bodies of immigrants and the oppressed, tend Earth’s body.”

As we enter into this year of listening for Jesus speaking, “You have heard it said.... But I say to you,” may our eyes and ears be tuned by God’s Spirit of Life, looking and listening for the fullness of revelation, for new counterscripts that are being breathed. The Law of God written in our Scripture is *good*. It has always been a living Law *for life*, a loving Law for the healing of the nations. May we open ourselves to the Spirit as we hope for and experience a broader and deeper revelation of God’s Law, a Law that is love and healing, giving and forgiving, gracious and merciful. God’s Law is a living Law for all humanity, for earth, for the cosmos. May the living Law of God be written onto our hearts and into our living.