

Fighting Words

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

We are in the series called “Beloved Community” right now. This is a sermon series but it's also our theme for the whole year. Our whole ministry year is going to be spent focusing on what it means to experience and contribute to a beloved community and we do that by when I do this with my hands we all say “loving our neighbors as ourselves”, right? We're going to be engaging in and contributing to a beloved community by.

[Voice of the Congregation] Loving our neighbors as ourselves.

That's right, this is our theme for the year and it's also the theme for this particular sermon series. Now we are continuing to use the Lectionary, which I'll say a bit more about in a minute, during this sermon series even though it's more of a topical thing and we'll be on the Lectionary all through the year. So my sermons are not always going to be hitting this “Beloved Community” topic, of course I will talk about it when it comes up from the texts that are assigned but really it's our job as a community as a whole to to live out this theme for the year. So “Beloved Community” is more than just lessons that I might try to teach you— but instead it's going to be a way of life for us. And so we hope that all of our ministry teams and our greenhouse small groups and our connection groups and really everything we do as a church will be focused in this direction on “Beloved Community” and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

So I mentioned that we are using the Lectionary during the sermon series and if you don't know what the Lectionary is it's just a collection of scriptural texts that are assigned for each week of the year. And over the course of a three year cycle you get a huge dose of Scripture, a very wide range of things. And each week there is four readings assigned, sometimes a little bit more than that, but usually it's four readings: one from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms, one from the New Testament letters and one from the Gospels. And it's wonderful because you can look weeks or even years in advance and find the scripture texts that are assigned for that Sunday and each week when you get ready to come to church if you're doing Bible reading on your own you can use the Lectionary texts and almost always you'll have the really neat experience of

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studying the Bible and then hearing those passages preached from and the song selection being informed by those passages. I say almost always because there are occasions when we have little mix ups and mistakes and this is one of them. So last week, this week and next week we have not been on the Lectionary, did you notice this? I don't need to go into too much detail but basically the Lectionary does assign readings for days of the week that are not Sundays if there's a feast day or something and weeks ago when I planned out this series I just was clicking through like, next next next and like making notes, next, making notes, and it turns out that last week's readings were actually for last Tuesday not last Sunday and today's readings for my sermon are from last week. And so we're often off and I'll fix it later and I want to apologize to those of you who've been looking and wondering and going what's going on here? You may have noticed that the "Children's moment" has been not correct, well it's like not correct I mean it's not the right word but it hasn't matched up with whatever our Lectionary readings are because it's using the actual Lectionary readings and we're not for this week and last week and next week.

At any rate I want to start today by reading one of last week's Lectionary readings from the prophet Isaiah. And if you'd like to turn in the in your Bibles to Isaiah Chapter 50 or use a red Bible and find page 594, that's where the text is going to be. And as you're looking for that let me just remind you that when we read from the prophets of Israel it's important to remember that the role of the prophets in Israel was not necessarily the role of predicting the future. That's what we think of when we think of the word prophecy, right? Like the chosen one prophecy in Star Wars or the—I call it the prophecy ball in Harry Potter, right? You know what I'm talking about? Where there is this statement made that's predicting the future. But that's not the first role of a prophet of Israel, the first rule of the prophet was to call God's people back to the ways of God when they had drifted into idolatry or forgetting the way that God wanted them to live and that kind of thing. And the prophets often had to do this by speaking truth to power they had to speak to the Kings and to the priestly class and to other rulers and tell them you have gone astray and you need to return to the ways of God. And so very often this ended up sounding a little bit like a predictive kind of prophecy usually in the form of like: "Turn back to God or this fancy palace you're living in is going to be reduced to rubble and dust". OK that that comes out sounding like a prophecy, like a prediction but that's not what it means necessarily first and foremost.

Still there are occasions where the profits speak in the kind of predictive way that we think of more commonly when we hear the word prophecy and today's verses from the prophet Isaiah fit into that category a little bit with their words that prefigure the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. So as the Chapter 50 verses 4 through 6, I'll read them aloud: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher that I may know how to sustain the weary with the word. Morning

by morning he wakens, wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward, I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. I did not hide my face from insults and spitting.” So if you have followed and studied the story of Jesus closely at all you know that these images of a person receiving insults and even torture match closely with what happened to Jesus at the hands of the Roman authorities, are you familiar with the story? You can see how this ancient Jewish text prefigured the Jewish Messiah Jesus. By the way Christ is just another language way of saying Messiah. But they also match with some of the teachings of Jesus, of course this is one of things that we like about Jesus is that his teaching was consistent with his actions and behavior— Jesus didn't just talk the talk. You know it's that thing in there about the the cheek, that evoke anything for you those of you who studied the teachings of Jesus? Jesus is- one of the most famous teachings of Jesus was to turn the other cheek, right? And some of that comes from the “Sermon on the Mount”. And I want to read to you a few verses from Jesus's “Sermon on the Mount” this is from Matthew chapter 5 and so if you want to go to page 706. You can follow along or you can just listen, I am going to jump around a little bit on this text.

But the “Sermon on the Mount” are teachings of Jesus that form and that inform a crucial central aspect of what it means to live a Christ-like life and to live your life in the way of Jesus. I often say that if if we were going to go if we knew we were going to be stranded on a desert island or if we were going into space to start a new human colony because screwed this one up so bad and we wanted to bring the Christian tradition with us but we could only bring a few chapters of the Bible, Matthew 5 to 7, the “Sermon on the Mount” is where I would probably start. This is the heart of Christian practice. So, we'll start with Matthew 5 38 and 39, it says: “You have heard that it was said ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ but I say to you do not resist an evil doer but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” so Jesus is actually quoting from the mosaic Jewish law here “Eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth” is part of the Jewish law. And by the way that that maybe sounds very vengeful? Like you're allowed to get back at somebody and what Jesus is essentially saying is that, no, you're not allowed to do that because he's taking and extending the Jewish law. But you need to know, probably helpful to know anyway that that original law was not designed to build vengeance into the system, it was designed to put a limit on vengeance, right? So the eye for eye thing it's a little gruesome but if you're someone plucks out your eyes you don't get to go and pluck out both of their eyes, just one. [Laughter]

But Jesus is like no, not even one— If someone strikes you on one cheek don't strike them on one cheek, strike them on zero cheeks and in fact you can turn the other one to them and let them have another go at it. Matthew 5 43-44 a little bit more of the “Sermon on the Mount”:

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“You have heard that it was said ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’ but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Want to go back up a little bit verse 21 and 22 and hear this from familiar form of Jesus teaching: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times ‘You shall not murder and whoever murders so be liable to judgment’ but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment 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.” Do you see the transition that happens here? First Jesus curtails our physical reaction to the violence of our enemies, right? That's the first one I quoted. You you may want to fight back, everything in you when you are struck once makes you want to fight back but no retaliation is not an option. And he has this part that shapes our spiritual response to our enemies. Love your enemies and not just love your enemies but pray for those who persecute you. And then he says, this is actually an earlier part, but he says you really can't even talk bad about somebody. If you insult someone, if you call them a fool, you'll be held liable to the same judgment as a murderer. And I put them in this order because I really think it's important for us to know how this progresses and proceeds in our life. I don't think violence is usually our first response, it's not the thing that we go to the first time we are wronged or the first time there's an offense. I think it actually starts with our our own internal experience— starts with anger that is not the righteous kind of anger, starts with insults and name calling. So a lot of you who can say “Well I don't really struggle with committing acts of physical violence” ought to remember that kind of by Jesus is definition you sort of still have a problem because you are prone to insults and ongoing anger. And the process continues with this kind of spiritual othering, this spiritual dismemberments or this disintegration of putting someone in another category so that you don't even have to pray for them anymore, you don't have to keep to care about their spiritual well being. And I think it's probably only after those kind of things have happened that we that we become really at risk of the physical type of violence of repaying evil with evil of our own. And Jesus knows and I think his teaching reflect this this idea that that the cycle of violence requires us to go back to the beginning. If a person is already very violent it's not enough to say stop being violent you can have to go back to the beginning and say what's at the root of that, this is what a lot of good therapy does, of course, right?

So that the Jewish law was intended to restrain violence and contain it and that was good as far as it went but it wasn't enough. What's required what was required for true peace and a shift toward nonviolence kind of on a like a existential level is actually a change of heart a total transformation of who we are as people. And that can start, and probably should start by, controlling the way we think and the way we talk. I'm sorry to be extremely practical right now but by controlling the way we talk first and foremost and I want to go a little bit deeper on that

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remembering that as we think this this month about instituting a beloved community where we love our neighbors as ourselves. Then a critical part of the vision of “Beloved Community” is a commitment to nonviolence. It's not only central to Dr. King's vision and what he had in mind when he popularized this phrase, “Beloved community” but it must be true for all Christians who want to see this dream this God-dream become a reality in the world the commitment to nonviolence has to be part of that along with eradication of poverty and racism. But because nonviolence begins in the heart and in the voice not in the fist or the fighter jet, we need to pay very close attention to what we think and to what we say.

And so the other Lectionary passage that I want to read today is from the Book of James and it addresses this idea very straightforwardly, very powerfully, it's not remotely subtle and I want to read it to you now, this is from James Chapter 3 verses 1-12 981 in the red Bibles and if you'd like to listen along you can, if you like to read along you can, this is a little bit of a longer passage. But I want you to hear these words and take them to heart, try as best you can to internalize them to let them interrogate you in your life a little bit. It starts out with the scariest sentences in the Bible for pastors: “Not many of you should become teachers my brothers and sisters for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness, for all of us make many mistakes” I just want you to know that that's in the Bible about leaders for all of us make many mistakes and God knows that I have and you certainly know that I have and I have shed your grace over the years but moving on “...anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect able to keep the whole body in check with the bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member yet it boasts of great exploits” and when the NRSV says member it means body part almost always”...How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire and the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members, among our body parts as a world of iniquity it stains the whole body sets on fire the cycle of nature and is itself set on fire by hell for every species of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species but no one can tame the tongue. A restless evil full of deadly poison with it we bless the Lord and Father and with that we curse those who are made in the likeness of God, from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives or a grape vine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.” So there's a lot there I could easily have dedicated entire sermons that passage and unpacking the poetry of it and talking about how beautifully and powerfully incisively it teaches us and maybe brings us to the point of shame and embarrassment at the way we talk. I thought the most fitting way to respond to this

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passage and reflect on it would be not to talk about it much more but rather to give all of you and myself a chance to be quiet and to stop moving the tongue. And so I'm going to give you, I'm going to give you a good long while, probably an uncomfortably long while maybe as much as five whole minutes of quiet and silence the absence of speaking anyway. And if you want to read through the passage again yourself you certainly can do that but mostly I want you to think about one simple question, I want to make you, want to ask you to answer one simple question, which is what words have you said about other people this past week? What words have you said about other people this past week? So you can take a few minutes and do that. By the way the beloved community coloring poster is at the back of the room and if it's helpful for you to process why you're you know kind of coloring in your welcome to use that anytime during the service but let's take some silence and think about this. What words have you said about other people this week?

So as you reflected on the words that you've used in the past week and maybe you thought even beyond that, I wonder what type of words you have used of other people and toward other people? Have they been fresh water or salt water? To use the language of James. Have they been words that sow seeds of peace or words that sow seeds of violence? If you had to take the words that you'd used and extend them out to their logical conclusion, what would that conclusion be? It's a little bit sobering, isn't that? Sometimes we have very good reason to be angry, to be hurt and it's— I just want you know it's-I don't consider it a simple thing to say you control the way you speak of other people because if you've been deeply wounded it's almost impossible perhaps to to live this teaching of Jesus. And yet I think it's the calling that he places on our lives. So I want to return to the words of Jesus in the “Sermon on the Mount”. It's right after he says the thing about calling your brother or sister a fool and being liable for murder. He says: “So when you're offering your gift at the altar if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you” in other words something that they could hold against you and that you've harmed them “then leave your gift there before the altar and go first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come in offer your gift.” And I love that Jesus basically tells people sometimes the work of God happens outside the church. Sometimes the last place you should be is church and the first place you should be is out there doing something, making something right. I do want to stop short of making this direct connection between the altar in the temple and the the Communion table, the altar in the church because I think sometimes the sacrament of Holy Communion is the is the food that we need, you hear me say this almost every week, it's food for our weary and hungry souls. That it's the thing that empowers us and strengthens us and energizes us to do the work that Jesus called us to do. And so I wouldn't say to you necessarily unless you're getting a very strong word from the Holy Spirit right now that if you have something some business to do with somebody who you are

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wrong that you should stay away from the Communion table. OK I'm not saying that's you if God saying that to you then I mean I don't mean to get in the way but but I would say to you that you might want to think about what you need to do to make this right. What do you need to say to someone? Is there someone that you need to call or somebody need to text or someone you need to actually pull aside right here in this room before you leave the place? Whoever it might be encourage you to be obedient to that prompting of the Spirit in your life.

And then will you join me in a spirit of prayer about this really difficult idea. God We are grateful for these words of Scripture even though they are so challenging and they seem to set the bar so high. We pray that our obedience to them would be part of making and experiencing the beloved community that is your picture of what the world should be like. May the same Holy Spirit that convicts us of our wrong give us strength and courage to participate with you in making it right. And maybe truly see that our change in words and thoughts would bring us closer to this idea of a nonviolent life and world consistent with the teaching and behavior of Jesus the Messiah, in whom we place our trust and our faith and in whose name we pray. Amen.

So while the band comes and leads us and a couple more songs I want to tell you the Artisan's community table is open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus in this place today. There's no membership requirement whatsoever, you simply should be seeking to follow Him and receiving His grace in need of it. If you prefer not to take communion that's certainly OK, we will have a number of the prayer team at the back of the room would be happy to pray with anyone who'd like to receive prayer or you can just simply sit and observed during this time listen to the music or sing along. But however the Spirit might be speaking to you and leading through-leading you this morning and encourage you to respond appropriately. Our table is open as we continue to worship God in this place, come if you will. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com