

Fulfill [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Matthew 5:13—20; 1 Corinthians 2:1—16

As a graduate of Penn State University, I loathe to bring this up; but there is one tradition of the Ohio State Buckeye Marching Band that's pretty cool. Before every home football game, all the musicians, baton-twirlers and drum majors step in rhythm to the fifty-yard line and then proceed to arrange themselves, fluidly and cursively, into the letters *O... H...I... O—'Ohio'*. And when they're almost done and every spectator in the crowd is cheering—a tuba player is escorted into that spot above the *i*, and with a dramatic bow he or she dots it. Every letter that's involved is beautifully choreographed. But for some reason, amid all those clarinet players and the trombone players, the embodiment of that dot on top of *ī* commands attention.

Now, I'm bringing this up today, not because of the Super Bowl traditions about to happen this afternoon, but because of the calligraphy to which Jesus refers in Matthew 5:18. After using the word "*fulfill*" in verse 17—he says, "***Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished.***" And I think he means it. Words matter to Jesus. And before the age of the printing press or today's penchant for electronic texting, there was sheep skin and there was papyrus, which were dried out and rolled into scrolls; and upon these scrolls various scribes would meticulously arrange the consonants and the vowels in which Jesus himself had been immersed. Those smudges and flairs of ink—those jots and tittles—matter to Jesus because of their meanings; and the particular meanings to which he's referring this morning are the iota's or the yod's of the Law of the Covenant.

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."

You see, according to Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, this is how Moses receives the *Ten Words*—what’s commonly known as the *Ten Commandments*—from Yahweh on Mount Sinai. And what’s interesting is that Jesus apparently chooses a mountain very similar to Sinai from which to teach. But notice how the letters of the words—that Jesus says won’t pass away until all is accomplished—begin. Every commandment begins and is predicated upon THE MARCHING OF GOD’S PEOPLE OUT OF SLAVERY and AWAY FROM THE EMPIRE OF EGYPT. And, if you and I take the time to really ponder this, it makes sense. Jesus isn’t talking about Roman Empire Law, which demands that every conquered people pay tribute to a divinized Caesar. Jesus isn’t talking about the Code of Hammurabi or the Edicts of King Nebuchadnezzar. Jesus isn’t talking about the legalese that’s passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives. God’s *Torah*—the words of which Jesus says will not pass away until all is accomplished—is a SAVING RELATIONSHIP. And together, by the grace of God, we are spelling it out!

Recently, however, you may have heard about the new law in Texas, signed by Governor Greg Abbot, which requires public elementary and middle schools to post a 16 x 20 inch poster of the Ten Commandments. And to this Senate Bill 10, a federal judge has issued an injunction, citing concerns for religious freedom and the separation of church and state. And here’s why I believe Jesus would welcome that injunction and disagree with the forced posting of the literal words of the Ten Commandments. And that is—prior to him saying, ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets...”*** he does NOT say, ‘So—let’s legislate this. Let’s try to impose our own sense of morality on everybody. Let’s mandate this requirement...’ What he says he says to the disciples: ***“You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world...”***

In other words—by the distinctiveness of your meek and merciful behaviors, so far as it depends upon you, preserve the relationships that have been given to you; preserve them like salt preserves food. Be that additive and the accent. Be what keeps the conversation going—not what shuts it down. Be salt. And be salt that has not lost its saltiness. And similarly, be the light by which the people can see the possibility of God salvaging creation. Don't be the gaudy neon light that draws attention to itself. Be the light that shines *on*, or shines *toward*, that which Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, declares possible: forgiveness, justice and reconciliation.

A man from Springfield, Ohio, called a press conference. His name is Nathan Clark and he was mourning because his son, Aidan, had died when a car swerved over the median-strip and crashed into a school bus. Mr. Clark called the press conference to be salt and to be light. You see, various politicians had seized upon the fact that the car had been driven by a Haitian Immigrant, who had been in the process of applying for U.S. citizenship. And so, with the politicians wanting to write laws to deport every immigrant—and referring to Haitians as 'animals' and 'vicious killers' invading our country—Mr. Clark said he didn't appreciate that at all. And from words he had written out cursively he read, "In order to live like Aiden, you need to accept everyone, choose to shine, make the difference, lead the way and be the inspiration."

Let's really ponder this: spiritual words derive their meanings from the Blessing, or from the Givenness, of RELATIONSHIPS. And in the life of Covenant Communities of Faith like this one, we are being trained to dot the *i*'s and cross the *t*'s of God's Love. And yet, as Saint Francis famously says, "Proclaim the gospel... and if necessary use words."

What's so obvious in the Apostle Paul's correspondence with the church in Corinth is that so many people are so impressed with themselves. Apparently, they take such pride in their wise words they set aside their embodied meanings. And in a time before nothing of the New Testament has been written down, opinions and rhetorical speeches abound. In response, Paul refrains from speaking "*lofty words of wisdom.*" On the contrary, he reminds them how he first arrived on the scene "*in weakness*" and "*in fear and trembling*"—"determined to know *nothing ... except Christ and him crucified.*" That's from the First Corinthians passage we read this morning. But here's what he has to say later in Second Corinthians, chapter three:

"You show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not in ink but with the Spirit of the Living God... Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, NOT OF LETTER, BUT OF SPIRIT; FOR THE LETTER KILLS, BUT THE SPIRIT GIVES LIFE."

In the 1997 film, *Seven Years in Tibet*, an Austrian mountain climber finds himself stranded in along the remote border-regions being claimed by China at the end of World War Two. Heinrich Harrer has escaped a prison camp and is unable to return home. He develops friendships with Buddhist monks and peasant villagers; and one frigid day he's bartering with a tradesman at the market, who's come upon a shipment of ice skates. The tradesman doesn't exactly know what they're for, and noticing the sharp blades, he tells the potential buyers that their purpose is to cut meat. Of course, the Austrian knows what the ice skates are supposed to do; and in the next scene; he's out there on a frozen pond, showing all the monks and villagers how to skate. There's one woman, in particular, whom he's trying to impress, and despite the fact that *he* can do all these skillful twists, turns and pirouettes, she keeps falling. Another westerner who knows what ice skates are for also tries to teach the woman but he does it differently.

Instead of showing everyone how good he himself is at skating—he takes her by hands and together they slide and together they tumble down and together they get back up again. Again and again. Their skates make little marks on the sheet of ice. And the marks look like the strokes of Hebrew letters— consonants and vowels—that have been written out on a page. And so—let me try to spell this out for you and I here at Northwood. If we truly want to be the *salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*—if we truly want to participate in *fulfilling* the Covenant of God’s Love—we’re going to have to try and fail. We’re going to have to slip and fall and get up again. The purpose of the Bible is not to cut meat—not to cut people down. And the purpose of the songs we sing and the prayers we utter is not to show off what good Christians we are. We’re going to have to risk failure again and again and again.

Jess Walter is a local author who’s written a book called, *So Far Gone*. In the book, he mentions a church in the West Central neighborhood of Spokane known as *The Abbey*; and it’s an actual church with an actual ministry to the lower-income folks who live and who die on those streets. But the church building itself does not have a bathroom... which is funny because in his writing about it, Jess Walter depicts a character as needing to use the bathroom in the church. The word *‘bathroom’* was just a word on the page... But guess what? On Friday last, Jess Walter and two other writers read some of their words at *The Abbey*; and their hope is to raise money to fulfill what had been just marks on the page, just strokes of a letter. The money raised will go to the construction of a bathroom.

And so, that’s one more word that God will fulfill.