



“Boiling It Down”

Text: Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

A couple of weeks ago, I told you about those Sunday afternoon drives that were a staple of the childhoods of many of us. No real plan. No disclosed destination. Off we'd go for a long afternoon ride.

On one of those Sunday afternoon drives, we found ourselves about 70 miles southeast of Pittsburgh in the little village of Meyersdale. Meyersdale was founded in 1776 and the principle industry for a very long time was mining coal out of the Allegheny Mountains. The town sits in a valley, along the Casselmann River, and it has never really grown all that much. There are just over 2,000 residents in Meyersdale today. The mine is long shut down, but in 2003 the Meyersdale Wind Farm began providing a new form of energy. Meyersdale is a place you have to go looking for, because it's nearly impossible to simply stumble upon it.

But that will all change beginning in just thirteen days. In thirteen days, on February 23, at 2:00 in the afternoon, Meyersdale will rise from its near invisibility - a Pennsylvania Brigadoon - as the first maple tree will be tapped and the Pennsylvania Maple Festival will officially begin. It will go on from March 23 through April 7. All kinds of festivities have been planned, including a quilt show, antique farm machinery show, a “sit and sip” garden (which we Evansvillians know as a “bierstube”), several performances of the play, “The Legend of the Magic Water,” a 8K/5K race, the judging of maple products, the grand parade, and the constant operation of the Lions Club Pancake House. Considering Meyersdale's normal existence, the Maple Festival makes you embrace the reality of the resurrection of the dead.

What I remember to this day, of our visit to Meyersdale, was the aroma of maple syrup hanging in the valley. The trees are tapped and the rising sap is gathered in buckets. The buckets are taken to the sugar shacks, where the sap is cooked - boiled down - in maple syrup. It takes forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. One tree can produce between 10 and 20 gallons of sap, so you instantly know that there are a lot of maple trees near Meyersdale. As the sap is cooked down, and the water rises into the atmosphere, it takes just enough of the perfume of the maple syrup into the air and you have a craving for pancakes and waffles. Our treat that day long ago was a piece of maple sugar candy, which was so sweet it would probably kill me today.

My mind took me back to Meyersdale as I thought about what this passage from Matthew's gospel was about and what sermon I was to share with you this morning. It seems to me that, as Matthew constructs this "sermon" from Jesus' sayings and teachings, some 50 to 60 years after the fact, when he comes to the final portion of the sermon - its conclusion - he does what most preachers do - he boils down everything that Jesus has said into a concentrated form.

Each one of the five closing teachings is a sermon (or two) in themselves, so addressing each paragraph individually will be impossible in our time this morning. The themes of the final five paragraphs are powerful:

- do not practice judgmentalism
- and do not pass judgment of those who differ from you;
- persist in the faith -
- asking God, seeking God, and knocking on God's door;
- do to others as you would have them do to you;
- do not be afraid when the road gets hard
- and the path becomes narrow -
- center and build your life on the way
- Jesus comes to share and all will be well.

These closing statements are a reflection of all that has come before them. From the Beatitudes to these final words, the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew's gospel, is a description of the work Jesus has come to do and the Kingdom that God is establishing now and in greater ways to come.

The Sermon on the Mount, in its entirety, is a condensation of all of Jesus' teachings. In places, it is specific and quite particular. In other places, it is painted with broad strokes. But it is the heart of what Jesus is all about.

These lessons are not some philosophical system of thought. They are grounded, earthy, and are extraordinarily practical. Don't condemn others, persevere when faith and trust are hard to keep, treat others as you would be treated, endure when living according to God's plan is more than hard, and stay focused and keep the way of Christ at the core of all that you do - these are the essential elements of the Christian life.

This is how we are to be the church. This is the heart of faith and life in Jesus Christ.

These are the ways that lead to understanding and peace. When we stop practicing the hateful business of condemning others because of their skin color, their country of origin, their social class, who they love, or any of the things that divide and destroy our humanity, and when we begin seeing all people as created in the image of God, we will find it hard to practice hatred and violence against them. When hatred and violence are put away, fear quickly follows.

When we live this new life that Jesus comes to demonstrate to us, we begin to see the darkness and shadows of the world melt away as we take up the work of being “the light of the world.” When we put away the ways of conflict and incompatibility and reach out to others and work together for the betterment of all, the light shines brighter. When we put an end to injustice, inequality, and unfairness, the world is suffused in the light of God’s love.

When the lessons of this sermon are enfolded by those who would call themselves Jesus’ disciples, despair is destroyed and hope rises like the mountains. When we bring these ancient words into our life here-and-now, there is enough for everyone and no one is in need. When we live out these lessons, joy replaces sorrow, compassion replaces indifference, and laughter replaces tears.

Boil it down. Concentrate the message Jesus gives. Distill the wisdom of Jesus’ way. What do you get?

do not practice judgmentalism

and do not pass judgment of those who differ from you;

persist in the faith -

asking God, seeking God, and knocking on God’s door;

do to others as you would have them do to you;

do not be afraid when the road gets hard

and the path becomes narrow -

center and build your life on the way

Jesus comes to share and all will be well.

And if you want to boil that down, you are left with that verse we’ve all heard and the verse we all know:

do to others as you would have them do to you;

It is not an accident that the words are filled with action. It is not given to us as, “think of others as you would have them think about you.” It is not, “wish for others what you would wish for yourself.” It is not even, “hope for others the things that are already yours.”

The word is “do.” It is an action. Christian faith is about action. It’s about giving yourself away for others. It’s about pouring yourself out when another is in need. It’s about being there when someone’s world is falling apart. It’s about standing with those the world stands against. It’s about caring for those the world has forgotten.

It's pounding nails into a Habitat house so that a family can have a safe place to live that they can call their own. It's about giving a Saturday morning to filling boxes of food at the Tri-State Food Bank so that elderly people have food to eat, or packing backpacks so that school kids can take food home for the weekend. It's about standing up to ignorance and hatred when some want others excluded from full participation in our community. It's about standing with the poor who are squeezed out in the name of downtown renewal. It's about making sure that every child and young person is given an equal education. It's about living into the statement we will make again in a few moments:

God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ
embraces the whole of human life:
social and cultural, economic and political,
scientific and technological, individual and corporate.

It is about living our faith in the wholeness of human life and bringing the fullness of human life to every person - because every person is created in the image of God.

So, if you haven't made any plans for spring break, you might want to consider a trip up to Meyersdale, Pennsylvania. Grab a few pancakes, drown them in some great syrup, take in the quilt show and the tractor show. It's not Panama City Beach, but I can pretty much assure you that most of them will keep their clothes on.

And breathe deeply the wonderful air. The warming aroma of maple syrup fills your olfactory passages and then sweetens your soul. They'll be boiling it all down, up there in Meyersdale.

And, even if you don't make the pilgrimage to Pennsylvania, breathe deeply the words of Jesus' summation. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Boil your life down to that concentrated exposition of all Jesus' teachings. And the sweetness of life - for you and for others - will fill your life. For now and evermore. Amen.



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

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