

“Kicking It up a Notch”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 12, 2023 – Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37](#)

Happy Super Bowl Sunday! I hope that you all have plans to do something good today, which may or may not include watching the world championship game of American football. We are starting the day off right, of course, by being here together at church, but I’m definitely looking forward to kicking it up a notch later today by watching the game (and commercials and halftime show) while feasting on chicken wings, made using my favored recipe, which is to toss them with some olive oil and lots of a Creole spice blend before grilling. “Bam!”, as celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse would say (or shout), as he does on all of the many TV programs he’s on while adding his own special blend of Creole seasoning to whatever food he’s making in order to “kick it up a notch.” Whatever you are doing today, whether it entails watching the game and enjoying food or working or doing something else, and whether you are by yourself or spending time with family or friends, I hope that it helps you to kick life up a notch or two.

Kicking life up a notch is exactly what God desires for us this day (and every day), not necessarily by sprinkling a peppery spice blend on yourself (although, if that’s your thing, go right ahead), but by living in such a way that adds zing and zest to your life and the lives of those around you.

Jesus talks about this kind of living in today’s gospel lesson from Matthew. Most people would probably not read the teachings of today’s passage and immediately think of them as being a recipe for kicking life up a notch, making it zingier and zestier, but this is what we have.

Today’s lesson continues a series of readings from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, during which he teaches his followers to please God by living in right ways. A couple weeks ago, we read the Beatitudes, in which Jesus taught those who followed him to see the blessedness of living humbly as people who enact justice and make peace. In today’s reading, Jesus teaches his disciples more about living a blessed life by following the teachings of their ancestors and by kicking them up a notch, not just following the letter of their laws, but by embracing the spirit of them. And so he says that not only should you not murder, you shouldn’t even

use your words to harm another person or to even wish for harm to come to them. Jesus reminds the disciples of another of their commandments, not to commit adultery, and that they should not only be faithful sexually when they commit to doing so in marriage, but they should not even be unfaithful in thought, so disrespecting their partners and others. Concerning divorce, he teaches that a man, who could have divorced his wife for any reason, large or small, should not betray his vows, because women, who in their society already had little agency outside of marriage, would face by being divorced a more difficult life, being suspected of unfaithfulness, becoming disrespected, and being unwelcome, unwanted, and powerless.

Jesus teaches that we should not just follow the letter of the law concerning these and other issues for the sake of doing so, but we should kick it up a notch by living in ways that honor the spirit of the teachings of our scriptures with their underlying concern of seeing more dignity and respect come to all people. When we live in ways that lift up others, we kick up our own lives a notch. This is the blessed life that God desires for us and others.

In our first reading from Deuteronomy, which were the closing words of Moses' very long farewell sermon to the wandering tribes of Israel, he reminds them that God has placed a blessed life before them, and that God sought for them to embrace a blessed life, but that they had to choose for themselves to do so by living as God intended.

The ways of a blessed, kicked up life are before us today as well. But is up to each of us to choose this life by living as God intends. We are to choose the blessed life by intentionally showing dignity and respect to all of God's children.

And so choose the blessed life by respecting all and by using your energies and other resources to work towards the creation of a more just world for all.

Wherever you see people being disrespected by being treated as though they matter less than others, engage in the work that lifts others up. During this Black History Month, in which we pay attention to the value of Black people in our own society and our long history of treating Black lives as though they matter less than the lives of others, let us be mindful of what we can contribute to the work of becoming a nation where people of all races are dignified and offered opportunities equally. Wherever people are rendered "less-than" because of

their gender identity or gender expression, their sexual orientation, their level of ability, their age, their education, their employment, their wealth, their marital status or relationship history, or any other aspect of their being, let us be engaged in the fight against the systems and ways of being that perpetuate the marginalization of others.

May we be faithful to our calling to live the blessed life. May God use us a means of blessing for others. May we see God and God's ways as our vision, and may our work ever be to see God's vision for our world to be realized. As you work towards seeing life in others being kicked up a notch, may God kick up the life within you a notch or ten. Amen.