

Sermon February 11, 12, 2023

Text: Matthew 5:21-37

You have heard it said....

But I say to you.....

Today's Gospel lesson is still part of the sermon on the mount. It comes after the reading in...

(Matthew 5: 19-20)

He tells us that he has not come to get rid of the old laws, but to fulfill the laws. If we break the least of the commandments, we are going to be the least of those in the kingdom of heaven. But if we keep his commandments and teach them to others, we will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

I don't know about you, but that sounds like scary stuff to me. I know that I sin daily. I feel like I am always sinning!

In our reading from today, he expands on the commandments that Moses gave the good people of Israel. He starts with what we might believe is the easiest one to obey. Don't commit murder! Well, I'm good, I haven't killed anyone today.....yet. He wants us to reconsider this, to take it further, don't be angry, don't hold a grudge against your brother or sister. Okay, that's a little tougher to do. He tells us before we bring our offering to God, go and make amends. Reconcile! There is an immediacy to what he is saying to us. We are not to take our time or wait for the right moment, go, now, apologize. Fix that relationship. Now. Much like when he called his disciples, he wanted an immediate response. Don't hesitate.

Let's be clear about this. There are times when we forgive someone, or try and it is not reciprocated. We are not being told to be forgiven by others, or to make them see the light, reading....see things my way. We are called to forgive and make amends.

Anger eats us up. It consumes us and alters us. In Ephesians 4:26 it says "Be angry, but sin not". Anger is a natural human emotion, experienced by all of us. Anger by itself is not a sin, but it can lead to sin. The Psalms are full of verses that shout at God! Now there is a time and place for anger. Anger used in the case of injustice, that's a good use of our energy. Even Jesus overthrew the tables in the temple and yelled at the people there.

Jesus himself experienced all of the same emotions that we do! But how many of us have hollered at someone in the other car for some infraction that I am sure I have done in the past. That perhaps you yourself have done.

So, we make amends, then and only then may we return to the altar and make our offerings or receive communion. This is the reason we have confession at the beginning of worship. This allows us to repair what might be broken. To come to the altar feeling loved and forgiven.

The next one hits a bit more to home. You shall not commit adultery. I have been married almost 38 years. Unfortunately, I have committed adultery in my heart. It's a known thing in my family that I really love Harry Connick Jr. I have often told my husband that the only man I would ever leave him for is Harry. It is a joke, but is it? Jesus tells me that I have committed adultery with my heart. Crud! And now he tells me that I need to lose an eye. That sounds a bit extreme to me. Jesus is not being literal about losing body parts, but it sure makes you think. Jesus wants our relationships to be life giving.

The section about divorce is no easier. None of us get married so that we can get divorced. We don't get married thinking, oh, I'll get divorced someday. Or, he would make a really good first husband. There are times when divorce is the only right solution. When Pastor asked me to preach this week and I saw the lessons, my heart dropped a bit. It's not something I often share, but I am divorced. I was married very young. It wasn't my decision to get divorced. But it happened. It needed to happen. In the bible study this week, Pastor clarified this a bit more for us. What Jesus was doing was challenging the community to uphold women. The text talks about what men may do. They could divorce for any reason and women couldn't do anything about it. Nor could women divorce a husband. Jesus wants more from this community of believers.

Jesus commands us to speak the truth. If we say yes, mean yes. If we say no, mean no. I have often told my kids, I don't make threats, I make promises. So they knew that if I spoke it, it was the truth. However, on occasion, I spoke in haste and would need to apologize, realizing that what I said may not have been a beneficial decision for our family.

One day, I was teaching some kiddos how to play BS (bologna sandwich).

If you are not familiar with the game, you have to lay cards down in numerical order. If you don't have that number, you fib about it. The point is to get rid of your cards. On that particular day, as I was trying to perfect someone's technique, one of the kids that I was teaching this too, exclaimed, "Miss Patty, are you teaching us to lie?!" Huh, I guess I am! How does this fall into the area of lies? Is it a white lie? Is it simply a strategy to win?

But what about those lies of omission? Lies damage relationships. That is not what Jesus wants for us. He wants more and expects more!

When Jesus expanded on these commandments, he spoke on his own authority. Something not done before. Certainly not by the rabbis of the day. And he used exaggerated examples to make his point. "If part of your body causes you to sin, cut it off!" Jesus is holding these commandments up for us and wants us to consider the spirit of the Law. Jesus is telling us that he expects more from his followers than just, "well, I didn't kill anyone today."

We need to dig deeper into ourselves, to get to the root of our sinfulness and let it go, get rid of it before it turns to more, before anger turns into hatred or murder. Before idle lust leads to adultery or divorce. Before a flip word turns into a hurtful lie. Before envy turns into full-blown jealousy. Before our hard heartedness turns us away from God's grace and love.

Refusing to let Christ change us, insisting that we are fine just the way we are, after all I didn't kill anyone today. By believing that it's enough to follow the basic rules without surrendering our whole selves to Christ, that is the way to pain, sorrow and separation from God.

David Lose writes that God gives the Law out of love for us, to strengthen community by pointing our attention toward the needs of our neighbor. The "you" in Matthew is plural. David says, "the law is not about meeting our individual needs but about creating and sustaining a community in which all of God's children can find nurture, health, safety, and blessing.....Jesus intensifies the law to make us more responsible for our neighbor's well-being."

We are called, as followers of Christ, to be more, do more. Go one step further to help others. We do it in this congregation, I hear of people

feeding people. You go on mission trips. You sponsor families. You love your neighbors and your kids. In previous work places, as I trained new employees, I always told them to go one step further than what is expected. Good customer experience, right? If someone asks “how long are you open today?”, tell them all of the hours. Their next question will be, “what about tomorrow?” More than what is expected. Society expects us to conform to certain standards, ways of behaving. Jesus has different standards. He expects more. We need to raise our standards, raise our expectations for ourselves. Because we are followers of Christ. The teachings of Jesus drive us to repentance.

And as followers of Christ, the thing that I am most thankful for is that Jesus loves me. Through my divorce, through my anger, self-destructive habits, through anxiety and depression, and even though I still really love Harry.....I am loved. I am forgiven as a Child of God. Every time I come to the altar and partake in the sacrament, I am loved and forgiven.

You have heard it said....

But I say to you.....

Amen!