

A Sermon for 6Ephiphany

Sunday, February 16, 2014 – Matthew 5: 21-37

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Over the past few weeks, the readings from the Gospel of Matthew have invited us in to an intimate conversation Jesus had with his disciples. Having somehow managed to find time away from the crowds, they traveled up the mountain a bit, and there Jesus explained to them, more deeply and intentionally, what he - and his very life - was about. And what *their* lives should be about. There was the recitation of what we have come to call The Beatitudes...blessed are the meek - the humble, blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Jesus spoke of salt, and light, hoping - no doubt - that in the metaphor of the very elemental and familiar, those around him could more easily understand. He said, "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill." And he spoke to them of righteousness.

And then comes the part of this conversation that we heard today with murder and lust, adultery and divorce and swearing oaths, with judgment and the hell of fire, with cutting off hands and ripping out eyes. And the passage ends "Let your word be "Yes, yes" or "No, no." What in the world does that mean?

Oh, this is a morning when it is tempting to preach on the Psalm instead...with its "Happy are those" stanzas...and just leave Jesus and the disciples sitting on that mountain.

But, you know, I think when we read from the Scripture - when we knock, and are invited in to what is written there - when we enter the circle of disciples listening to Jesus speak - we must resist the temptation to walk away from, walk past, the parts that, at least on the surface, don't sound so "nice." The parts that are murky. The parts that are challenging. The parts that make us squirm just a little.

Today's reading continues from last week, with Jesus talking about the law. If those gathered round him were, in their human-ness, anything like you and me, I have no doubt that at least one or two of them may have hoped Jesus was going to tell them that there was no longer need for law...or at least that in following him, they (personally) would not need to concern themselves with the law - that the old law would be no more. But what Jesus did, instead, was take the laws by which their lives were managed - for lack of better word - and make them even deeper, broader, more nuanced and more complex. More demanding.

Jesus said, "I came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." Jesus came to call and form disciples in a community devoted to a higher righteousness. To teach *us* to follow the commandments not simply because they are rules, but to follow the commandments so that we might become the very sort of people Christ wants us to be, people formed and fashioned for life in the kingdom of God.*

In ancient times, Jesus explained, the law was given. "Do not murder." Well, of course not! Who would condone murder? Who, among us, would kill someone? Yet, we are capable of despising...sometimes even hating. We too easily and too readily engage in character assassination with our cutting remarks about others. We kill relationships and we are *capable* of treating one another with both the contempt and the derision that says, "You don't exist to me."

Jesus said, "Do not murder," and in the very next breath he spoke of anger. Anger toward a brother or sister, insult toward a friend or stranger. Do not bring *this* before the altar of God, Jesus said. Take care of this business, in your life and in your heart, *before* you come before God. Speak face to face, if need be. Seek and offer forgiveness. Cleanse your life and purify your heart...or the gifts you present to God, even the gift of yourself, will be false.

And, oh, we are so blessed, that every time we come to God's table to offer ourselves, to receive God's bounteous grace in return, we come with the grace-filled opportunity to first confess our sins against God and our neighbor. We come with the reassuring absolution of our sins. We come, when we come in honesty and humility, forgiven.

The commandment forbidding adultery – and the strict laws regarding divorce – are one thing, Jesus said. But unfaithfulness – to spouse, to friends, to any brother or sister – is no less harmful and hurtful if it is hidden, rather than out in the open. Disrespect is just a way of telling someone else he or she is less than I am. If I am outwardly faithful to my partner, my family, and my friends, but inwardly love them less than I love myself, then I am mired in the sin of hypocrisy. And until I get rid of that sin – that metaphorical eye – that metaphorical hand – I cannot be whole.

If there is a little chuckle in any of this, it probably rises up in Jesus' exhortation about "swearing falsely." The imp in me would say that I have heard few people swear who were not swearing with an honesty and intensity that comes straight from the gut, as well as straight from the gutter. Of course Jesus was not talking about cursing...he was speaking of telling – and not telling – the truth. Speaking the truth, in real life terms, can feel like a minefield. We are all too familiar with the subtle shades of truth – the blurred lines of speaking truth in love – or at least to *those* we love – when an out-and-out truth might be hurtful. Tell the truth, Jesus said. Let your "yes" really mean yes, and your "no" mean no. Because even if we can keep from swearing falsely, even if we can tell the truth, we are still capable of manipulating others with our words, of leading others astray by what we say, of intentionally letting our words be meaningless rather than committing to what we know is right.

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave a description of the *character* of disciples*, fit for the Kingdom:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

We put on this kind of character - humble, peaceful, merciful, righteous – we become this person – not by forsaking the law; rather, we become this person by following the law with true intention. God gave the commandments not so that we would become moral rule keepers; rather, God gave us the commandments as guides and exhortations for the *formation* of our character, so that we might become

people who are pure in heart, so that we might love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, so that we might love our neighbor as ourselves.

Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill. The law – the way to live – the way to **be** – still stands. Jesus, Incarnate Son of God, has breathed new life into the commandments – giving them more relevancy – telling us what they mean in their fullness - explaining what they mean if we are to love as God loves, because the law tells us what is in God’s heart. Law exposes God’s fondest desires of how we would live with one another. And, law also exposes the difference between our hearts and God’s heart.

Our hearts, though we are made in the image of God, do not keep time with the beating of God’s heart. As the Reverend Amy Richter says, “While God’s heart sings out a love song, begun in creation and sung to us still, our hearts fall far short.”

And so, it is in God’s *mercy* that God gives us law. In the teachings of Jesus, this is law that will not let our hearts fall short of loving as God would have us love. It is law that would have us love in a way that respects the dignity of every human being, as we say in our baptismal covenant. It is the law to which we either say ‘no, no’ or ‘yes! yes!’ ...every moment...every decision of our lives.

And are we doomed to fail? If this law comprises the complexity and magnitude of *all* that God would have us do, are we defeated before we begin? Why bother? Why?

The answer is startling in its simplicity. We were created for love! Not for hurt or hatefulness. Not for anger or self-aggrandizement. For love. The God of law is the God of love – radical, unconditional, encouraging, sacrificing, forgiving love. The kind of love God’s law would have *us* live. Love that strives, always, for right relationship with our neighbor, our kin, and even ourselves. Love that strives, always, for right relationship with God. Love we can practice...and practice and practice some more...until we say yes, more often than no, to the gift of God’s grace, offered for us...until we, too, begin to sing out the love song God never stops singing.

* With gratitude to the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano, for deeper understanding in the tricky parts!