

Sixth Sunday of Epiphany/February 12, 2017

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-37;

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"Wider and Deeper"

Today in our gospel reading, we continue with Jesus' words at the Sermon on the Mount. Remember, we started with the Beatitudes, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . Blessed are the merciful . . . the pure in heart . . . the peacemakers . . ."* Then Jesus tells them, *"You are the salt of the earth"* and *"You are the light of the world"*.

And then he says, *"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them."* And that brings us to our passages for today. The Law and the Prophets. Today we have the first of 6 statements that Jesus makes. Some scholars have called them "antitheses" and some refer to them simply as "polemics" stating that they proclaim a message that is opposite or over and against the Law and the legalism of the Judaism of Jesus' time, and which speaks of a new, higher righteousness that Jesus preaches.

However, I agree with other scholars that don't think that is what is really happening here. Rather, Jesus is using a teaching technique that was quite common among rabbis of that time. Taking a Biblical passage, explaining what it means, and then giving the teacher's new understanding of it. *"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times . . . But I say . . ."* So here we have Jesus taking up a number of issues that would have been relevant to his time and to his listeners. And some 40 or so years later, when the author of this gospel wrote these words down, he would have included his own take on them for his time and his community to which he was addressing.

First Jesus quotes the 6th commandment of Moses. *"You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment."* Jesus takes this seemingly straightforward commandment and extends it. Not only if you take part in the act of killing someone, if you even harbor anger in your heart toward another, you are liable to judgment. Or even if you insult another or call someone "fool" you are liable to judgment. There is mention of the "council" here and that is most likely a reference to the Sanhedrin, the governing body of religious leaders of the Temple.

But the point of his message has to do with relationship and how one lives with others around them. Jesus then gives this bit of instruction: *"If you're offering your gift at the altar"* (and this could refer to the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem, or at a local shrine or synagogue where many would go who could not afford the long trip to Jerusalem), *"and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there . . . and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."*

Do you see what he is doing here? He is talking not just about murder, not just about those who kill another, not just about following the letter of the law, but about the underlying emotion that leads one to kill or murder. Jesus is saying that in the Kingdom of God, in the realm of God's love, those feelings, those emotions cannot coexist with love. They have no place here. And if you are worshipping and about to offer your gift to God, your appeal to God for forgiveness and to be in right relationship with your maker, well you better be in right relationship with your neighbor as well, otherwise there is no point. The book of I John reflects this same concept, *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."* (I John 4:20). Jesus is expanding the commandment, asking us to take a wider view, to go deeper than what is written on the page.

Next Jesus talks about the commandment to not commit adultery. It is not only the act, but anyone who looks lustfully at another, commits adultery in their heart. Again, Jesus takes us to the underlying emotion or motivation for adultery. Lust turns the relationship between people into one of objectivity where the other is seen as an object of one's desire, not as an equal, not as a human person, but something to be used for one's own selfish needs. This is not the way we see each other within the realm of God's love.

Likewise with the issue of divorce. We need to understand the context here to understand what Jesus is really saying. In that time and culture, women were still considered property of men. She belonged to her father before marriage and to her husband upon betrothal. In that patriarchal system, men had the power to declare divorce. But if a woman was divorced and her father was no longer alive to take her back into his home, or if she had no brother to take her in, she had no place to go, since if she remarried she would be guilty of adultery. What Jesus does, is put the responsibility on the man, he, not the woman, is the guilty party here because he has the power in this relationship. But more than that, divorce goes against God's desires for human beings. In Mark (10:5) Jesus says to the Pharisees that it was for your "hardness of heart" that Moses gave you this teaching on divorce. Jesus points to God's original intention for marriage, that it should be forever.

However, Matthew does make an exception that divorce is allowable in the case of unchastity. How about in our day, when so many have experienced the process of divorce, what would Jesus say to us now? I think that he would ask us to look at the underlying issues. If the relationship cannot support an equal and mutual love between the two people, which is what God truly desires, and all attempts have been made to secure that kind of relationship, then perhaps divorce is necessary. But I think he would say that it should be conducted with as much love and forgiveness, understanding and reconciliation, as is possible.

Finally, Jesus speaks about swearing or taking of an oath. Basically, this is about making vows or taking oaths to say that you are being truthful and honest about something, generally something important like your statement in a court of law or in a legal or business transaction. But Jesus is saying, you shouldn't need to take any oath. Everything you say should be truthful. You should be honest in all your actions and dealings. *"Your 'Yes' should be 'Yes' and your 'No' should be 'No.'"* There should never even be a question about it. The realm of God has no place for lies and untruths.

So what does this tell us about our own lives? Have Jesus' teachings become irrelevant for today? Are the commandments of God past their efficacy? Jesus would tell us that the commandments are still as essential today as they ever were. That he came not to abolish them but to fulfill them and that we are to live into that fulfillment. That they are not static black and white rules to be strictly enforced but that they are living words that we need to look at with a wider and deeper perspective. That the way of our God should dwell within us, as the prophet Jeremiah wrote, *"(God says) I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people."* (Jer. 31:33)

In a time when there is so much division, so much uncertainty about what is true and what is false, so much mistrust, so much deceit, anger, resentment and hatred within our world, now more than ever we need to proclaim and live the way of God's realm of love, the "kingdom" as we like to say, where all are seen as equals, related, as brothers and sisters, as beloved children of our one God. All that we do, all that we say, the rules and laws that we set and administer for our communities and our nation, the things we teach our children, all should be seen within that broad scope of God's all inclusive, never ending and ever faithful love for us, for all of us. It's all really about relationship. And now more than ever, we need to open our eyes, open our minds and open our hearts and take care of one another. We need to love. Amen.