

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Preacher: The Rev. Christopher McLaren  
Sunday Feb. 16, 2020 Epiphany 6A  
Text: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20, Matthew 5: 21-37  
Theme: Working on Ourselves with the help of God and Our Community of Faith

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Today's reading comes from the section of scripture known as the Sermon on the Mount. It is heavy and demanding teaching by Jesus. Some Christian groups focus on this section of scripture intently calling it "the little gospel," feeling that it contains the core teachings of Jesus of which the rest of the gospels are really commentary.

Jesus taught with a peculiar kind of personal authority. The truth is that Jesus' approach to the Torah was fresh in ways that made people take notice. It was at times strong and traditional "not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law" and often innovative and surprising, "you have heard it said, but I say to you." Jesus rarely let people off the hook from the demands of the law. It was no message of Free Love, Hookah bars and Galileean Hip Hop. Rather at times Jesus surprised people by intensifying the law, deepening the prohibition against murder to include anger and the one against adultery to include lust. Jesus thrived on raising the bar of what it meant to be righteous. His teaching served to deepen the relational field in which all of the law or Torah was to be understood.

The Gospel writer of Matthew quotes Jesus saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come to fulfill them." (Matt 5:17). Jesus is not interested in doing away with the law and prophets. In fact, he is the fulfillment of their many promises. One way to envision the law and the prophets, the ancient writings from the Hebrew scriptures is that they structure the relationship between God and people and contain promises about the shape of God's saving work for all people.

When one understands the law and prophets in this way it is inadvisable to reject these scriptures or to write them off as outdated or old fashioned. Jesus said as much that only the least in the kingdom fail to see the continuity between Jesus and the prophets. The great in the kingdom can see the line from Adam to Christ and probe the mysteries of God's purposes in history. The law and the prophets are to be understood as a source of life, a way of life that leads to shalom between people and right relationship with God. When Moses speaks of renewing the covenant with the people he says of the law and prophets, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast... Choosing life seems like a kind of no brainer, but as we well know humans are uncanny in their ability to choose death over life in remarkable ways.

For Christians there is a sense in which Jesus' teaching on the law takes center stage. His teaching pushes the law and prophets and transcends them in a way that we need to talk about.

In the section of scriptures we read from today, Jesus is basically expanding the Ten Commandments as a kind of new Moses. In some ways we might feel that he is expanding them in an extreme and unrealistic way every time he says, But I say to you...

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times. "You shall not murder... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

This is a tough saying for who among us has not been angry or called someone a fool. Are we liable to hell? This sermon is getting out of hand already. (I'm having a little PTSD from my grandparents who were deeply concerned about my salvation so much so that they ruined our relationship.) As one commentator points out, Jesus is interested in the interior of our lives. He goes deeper than the final act of murder to the inner motivations and core of the person. To be sure murder is an act of aggression but it comes from somewhere inside the person. Inside the person there is first anger and contempt. This anger and contempt overflow into abusive speech and the abusive speech and the cultivation of hatred can lead to murderous thoughts and possibly murderous actions. Jesus is not just concerned about the culminating act, he is concerned about the origins and growth of the thoughts and attitudes that lead to violent action, what ancient rabbis called "evil imaginings." Jesus wants to intensify the law; he wants people to see that righteousness is a matter of cultivating one's heart or guarding against the seeds of violence beginning to grow from within the person.

"When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.

What is this about? I'm going to try to put this into Episcopalian. Let's put it this way, liturgy is not a substitute for dealing directly with the person you have wronged, but most of us wish it were true. Going through a public liturgy and confessing your sins or asking God for forgiveness is easier than seeking out the one you have offended and engaging in the difficult process of reconciliation. The human tendency is to avoid this hard work of face-to-face reconciliation of working out our differences and making heartfelt apologies and really listening to one another. But again, Jesus wants something more from us than hollow worship or the appearance of being upright and righteous in the assembly. Jesus wants us to do the hard work of relationships and of working on ourselves so that we might truly be a people of God, reconciled and reconciling. For that is something beautiful, a people who are strong enough to forgive and be forgiven is a community of character and substance.

I believe that if the mainline church in America was actually good at this spiritual skill of forgiveness and reconciliation we would not be in a crisis of decline.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your eyes than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ....

Ok I realize that this is a rather sexist passage when read in 21st century America and there is a lot of updating we could do to put this into our own culture and language. But it doesn't take genius to figure out that our culture still has issues with this witness the #Metoo movement and the trial of Harvey Weinstein going on right now in our newspapers. So, let's talk a little about the sexual ethics in what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying something like "Hey, adultery doesn't just come out of nowhere it starts from within." What should one do to avoid it? Jesus suggests "whatever it takes," gouge out your eye, cut off your hand. Of course, this is hyperbole with a purpose. Jesus is actually suggesting that radical inner work is needed to avoid the dangers of lust that leads to infidelity and broken relationships and pain and suffering for families and more. One commentator put it this way:

*If males are going to understand their lustful, oppressive attitudes toward women, they must explore their thoughts. The right hand and the right eye are scapegoats, mere servants of strangely twisted mental and emotional processes. However, they function as symbols of how a part of us, sexual desire, can dominate the whole and bring it to ruin. If we fail to learn about and integrate our sexual desires into our larger life values and goals, we will be undercut by this lack of attention. (Shea)*

I know that I don't have time to discuss every teaching in this passage. The teaching on divorce makes many of us uneasy and comes out of a very specific concern about the culture Jesus was living in. No one is here to make divorce fine and good as we understand marriage as a sacrament, but we also understand that divorce may be the best and most healthy and life-giving choice a person could make. Jesus was speaking these words at a time when women were not able to be financially independent and were required to be married for both economic and social reasons. Jesus is doing something very radical in this passage, he is constituting a community whereby women do not have to be remarried. Jesus was beginning to envision a community of Christians where women who had been cast off by their husbands were safe and cared for and did not have to remarry, a community of character and friendship that would serve as an alternative to the loneliness of the world. As some have remarked, In the first century, the conservative patriarchal Roman family would have looked at the immoral Christian community as a den of iniquity and unusual friendships for creating a new kind of family that cared for those who had been disowned or cast out of their family systems for any number of reasons.

So, the bigger question is how are we actually supposed to understand this part of Jesus' most famous sermon? I imagine that while each of us listened to the Gospel today we began to feel a little inadequate, deflated, guilty, and perhaps hopeless. Who can actually live like that? Indeed, no one can live these standards on their own. That's actually the whole point (cf. Stanley Hauerwas' Matthew, 2006, p. 61).

These prescriptions for living are meant to take away our confidence in our own individual goodness and instead rely on God and each other more and more.

The point of Jesus' teaching is that living the way that God really desires for us to live is difficult and challenging. But we can't separate the way of living Jesus demands from a life-giving relationship with Christ. We can't do it on our own and we won't do it on our own. We need the Spirit of God at work within us, we need the gift of Christian community surrounding us, we need the example of the saints sitting in the pews next to us to have a chance of living like Jesus lived and demonstrated. Jesus is not trying to discourage you and make you believe that the Christian life is unattainable, his sermon is meant to create a community in which living like this is possible because it is grounded in Christ's own life. Jesus intensifies the law and the prophets and in so doing invites us into a community, called church, where we begin to unlearn the ways of the world and discover a new way of life that is difficult but worth it. You may have heard the powerful saying by GK Chesterton, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been tried and found difficult, so it has been mostly left untried." Jesus invites each of us into a life that privileges being truthful over trying to impress others or hiding who we really are, a life that cultivates an inner life that is reflective enough to deal with anger and lust and thereby saves relationships from destruction, a life that invites us into the life-giving practice of forgiveness and reconciliation instead of the unending cycle of resentment, anger and retaliation.

One of the oldest pieces of spiritual advice is, "Know yourself." It is meant to push people down the path of self-discovery. It is some of the most important work we can do. It may begin with social concerns and the desire for intimate relationships but it inevitably turns inward to the core of who we are. **If you really want to know yourself you will set up a watching and listening post in the center of your being.** From the command center you will do the hard work of beginning to pay attention to how your mind works and to the movements of your heart. (Shea)

Gradually this inner seeing will yield fertile insights into how the mind works in general and how yours in particular works. When one begins to discover this knowledge and can accept it in love, it can become the raw material of transformation and change from within. We can begin to discover with God's help and the Spirit's guiding the deeper drivers of our moods, motivations, and behaviors. We are open then to the possibility of inner change that will lead us to new behaviors and new ways of being in the world. This work is not easy, as it requires silence and sometimes guides along the way in the form of spiritual

directors, counselors and spiritual friends. Choosing life is persistent and joyful work. (Shea)

I think this Gospel today is about just this kind of work that each of us is invited into. Jesus bids us to come to self-knowledge around a few crucial issues. Do we know how anger rises within us, comes to expression, and subsides? We should be aware of our own lusts and how they grab hold of us and push us along paths that we may not choose. We should become aware of how we want shortcuts to forgiveness, how we hesitate and sometimes completely stall when it comes to initiating reconciling conversations. Why are our drives to anger and lust so strong and unwieldy and our drive to reconciliation so weak? This is the work of faith that each of us are invited into by Jesus' pesky and difficult Sermon on the Mount.

I remember a friend once telling me that the Sermon on the Mount was just Jesus' list of impossible things we can't do. I suppose that he was right in a certain way. There is something about the Sermon on the Mount that does seem out a reach at times or just downright difficult. But at the same time, there is something deeply attractive about this Way of Love that Jesus not only asks of us but demonstrates with his own life.

It may be true that living the Sermon on the Mount all the time is impossible, but that is meant to show us our deep need of God not lead us to despair or shame. Jesus' teaching forces us to depend upon not just our own strength but on the Spirit of God at work with in us urging us toward life. It forces us to depend upon one another in the Christian community that urges us on to a life of character full of truthfulness about ourselves, forgiveness for one another, compassion for those who have failed or become lost and love for all. It is a gift to have something beautiful, truthful, challenging and life-giving at the center of our lives. It is a gift that the Word is very near to us, in our mouth and in our hearts.

As Moses said long ago, "I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life. May it be so among us.

*Note: I wish to acknowledge my deep debt to the John Shea's insightful commentary on this passage and to his writing about setting up an inner watching and listening post at the center of our lives as a place of deepening self-knowledge.*