

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

February 12, 2017

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:16-17, 21-37

But I Say to You...

Some of us are rule followers - others not so much.

Some laws are obviously for our benefit and the benefit of society:

You're not allowed to own an exploding golf ball (Mass.)

Others not so much:

You can't wear a fake mustache that causes laughter in church. (Alabama)

Whatever we think of these laws - to understand these words of Jesus today - we need to realize that the law in ancient and then first century Judaism functioned differently than we're probably used to thinking about it.

First, *the law is given always as a gift*. The law, particularly as captured in the Ten Commandments that Jesus references, are life's little instruction book, God's gift to help us get more from this life. The law is not the means by which we become God's people or we earn God's love, but rather a gift given to God's people because God loves us.

Second, *the law is given to strengthen community*. The "you" in our readings is always plural. The law isn't 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.

The logic here is simple. When you're looking out for yourself, it's you against the world. When you look out for the others in your community, and they in turn look out for you, it's the community together that faces the challenges, setbacks, and opportunities that come our way.

Third, the law comes as a gift to strengthen community by *orienting us to the needs of others*. The law, to be clear, is not meant to remove the neighbor and their needs from our view or concern, but rather draws us to them more closely. That's why, I think, Jesus intensifies the law in today's reading - to help us avoid seeing the law as merely drawing moral boundaries, and instead alert us to our responsibility to care for those around us.

Because, by caring for others, we strengthen our community so that it can best serve as a blessing to the world. And being a blessing to the world is what God expects of us. (Salt and light from last week!)

And so to help us in this, Jesus has come - and in particular, he has come to fulfill the law... which is an odd thing to say, let alone do.... And so he explains, with a series of "You have heard it said, but I say to you" statements. Four of them this week (we'll get the last two next week)

In them, Jesus is bringing about a revolution of values, and overturning conventions to help us live not in fear or in tolerance of one another at best, but in eager service, concern, care for and trust of one another.

This is what Christ wants for the world God the Father has made, and for the people who bear His image. Is it really enough then to say, "I am not a murderer"?

Well, "No," says Jesus. He knows we need to be healed of the unrest in our hearts as much as we need tough laws against murder. Because he knows murder arises from violence within...that it spills out from

contempt for life, and explodes from an inner rage...that it erupts from chaos, and bursts from anger against our brother, sisters, spouses and neighbors.

And, Jesus says, seeds of murder can be detected in as seemingly a small thing as name-calling. Yes, Jesus says, name calling. You know how it is...

The jerk who steals our parking space,
The moron sliding 8 items through in the 7 item line at Market Basket,
The boor making a left turn from the right hand lane,
The idiot hostess at the restaurant who told us it'd be a half hour wait for dinner when it was more like an hour.

Jesus knows that murder isn't really our problem - and so he speaks to our hearts, which create the environments that breed frustration and which can lead to rage and fury; from which we are not exempt. Some of us may know the anger born of a father's humiliation, or a mother's abandonment; of an employer's scorn, a spouse's betrayal, or a friend's rejection; a job gone wrong, or a misplaced accusation.

Anger, very simply, wrecks community and destroys relationships. Laws against murder are hardly enough for the people of God. We need hearts surrendered to the love and patience of Jesus Christ.

And it's not only anger that can be healed in this community of peace rooted in the grace of Christ. The injured and ruptured relationships between spouses can be healed too.

To understand Jesus' words here on divorce it's helpful to remember that marriage then was not at all what we know and expect of it now. In fact marrying for love is a relatively recent phenomenon which didn't become a thing until the industrial revolution of the mid 1800's.

And there was a complicated set of laws and practices around marriage - divorce - and remarriage - both in ancient Judaism of the Old Testament and first century Judaism of Jesus' time.

The point Jesus is making is that it is a man's responsibility to be loyal to his wife - for all who are married to be faithful - to avoid transgressing the commandment to commit adultery even in our thought life. Notice the progression...

It begins in the mind, 'adultery in the heart',
develops in the eyes, and then hands.
Next it becomes adultery by proxy ('make her commit adultery'),
And finally he commits adultery himself.

Please don't get caught up in the particularities of 1st century Jewish laws on divorce and remarriage - hear instead the point Jesus is making.

It all goes back to the heart. Sure don't commit adultery (or said in the positive, be and remain faithful), so keep your mind and your heart faithful. What Christ offers us here is a reconciled and restored community, including in our marriages.

We can know flourishing, life-giving, selfless communities; and we know what can destroy them. Adultery and divorce, Jesus says - as much as they represent estrangement, separation, division - adultery and divorce are born of diverted loyalties, and misplaced hearts gone cold.

The breaking of covenant between people begins - begins! - in the heart. Adultery and divorce are the result, the endgame of something broken long ago. But life in Christ enables us to live differently, on grace-filled terms. Life in Christ is a life in which we seek to align our heart with his, knowing that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks and our actions flow.

Is the pattern becoming obvious? What matters is the character of our inner life - because our inner life determines our outer life.

When we turn our lives over to Christ, we illustrate an integrity binding who we are to what we say. Our words, our deeds, our body language all express truth inseparable from the depths of our innermost being.

And so oaths, Jesus says, are moot. They are irrelevant because being grounded in Christ is oath enough.

When people testify in court, they swear an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth (do they still put their hand on the Bible?) as if speaking under oath should be different from speaking without "oath." Well, Jesus says it shouldn't make any difference! What we say, what we do, who we are should be the same in all circumstances.

Years ago, I was having a discussion with a bunch of teenagers in the church, and one of them described a situation at school and how she responded, which wasn't very kind hearted. And then, so quickly she added, "but I'd never do anything like that at church, only at school."

What we say, what we do, and who we are, should be the same in all circumstances. Our "yes" is "yes" and our "no" is "no." Our Christian lives are all the oath we need!

These are hard teachings. Jesus ups the ante - big time. Anger, lust, divorce, making sworn promises....But remember, they are given by our God whose law is ultimately love.

The story goes about a young boy about eight years old, Frank, who one day started arguing with his sister. Before long, arguing turned to pushing and shoving, and, soon enough, Frank had his younger sister pinned to the ground with his fist raised in the air. At that moment, his mother came into the room and told him to stop it.

In response, Frank reared up as only an eight-year-old can and declared, fist still raised in the air, "She's my sister. I can do anything I want to her." At this point, Frank's mom swooped across the room, towered over him, and said, "She's my daughter - *no you can't!*"

That's the law: God's gift to protect and care for His children. Because God cares so deeply about us, "No you can't hoard everything. No you can't discriminate and exclude. No you can't violate and exploit. Because she is my daughter, and he is my son."

Jesus reveals/manifests the heart of our God who wants nothing more than health and happiness for His children.

And following him will make all the difference - for each of us, for our church, for our schools, for our neighborhoods, for where we work...

In short - Sharing Christ/Changing Lives!

Amen.