

Our Gospel text this morning is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. Now, when this particular text comes up on the lectionary, I'm told that most preachers find themselves called toward one of the other texts that are provided, but as a seminary student I didn't know any better. However, I think I learned my lesson because, well this is complicated.

Listen to the words that God brings to us this morning:

Matthew 5:21-37. I am reading from the Common English Bible

21 "You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don't commit murder*,^[a] and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell. 23 Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift. 25 Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there until you've paid the very last penny.

27 “You have heard that it was said, *Don’t commit adultery.*

[b] 28 But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. 29 And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It’s better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell.

31 “It was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must *give her a divorce certificate.*’ [c] 32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness forces her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 “Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: *Don’t make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord.* [d] 34 But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it’s God’s throne. 35 You must not pledge by the earth, because it’s God’s footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it’s the city of the great king. 36 And you must not pledge by your head, because you can’t turn one hair white or black. 37 Let your yes mean yes, and your *no* mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

O God, Bless these words to our understanding, Amen.

IT'S COMPLICATED

It was in early January when I committed to these texts. I was on a seminary explorations trip in Cuba and each morning I got up early to watch the sun rise over the Matanzas Bay and I would also read over these texts before engaging in our scheduled activities for the day.

Some of my classmates and I played a little game where we would remember particular phrases that would come up during our interactions. One of these phrases that ran constant throughout the week also spoke to me as I read this text from Matthew. Whenever we would talk with church leaders in Cuba or professors at the seminary in Matanzas, it was inevitable that somewhere within their comments was the phrase, "it's complicated." I think some of the complicated-ness was with language barriers, but mostly, life in Cuba, as we learned is well, pretty complicated. I was so grateful that one of my classmates who joined us on our trip is a Cuban woman who graduated from the seminary in Cuba. After Diana Rosa said that particular phrase for maybe the 50th time, she followed it by saying, "unless you are from Cuba, you will never fully understand." That I understood.

I feel the same way about our gospel text. It is complicated and we may not fully understand what is meant by it. But such is the case with much of scripture, no?

Many scholars who provided commentary on this text say that Jesus is offering six antitheses to established Jewish law, four of which we are exploring this morning. But it was made clear in the passage just prior to this one (which you may remember from last week) that Jesus is not contradicting the law of Moses, he is in fact enhancing or clarifying the law. So, I think instead of being labeled "antitheses", we should understand Jesus to be reframing. or providing a re-thesis.

So, Jesus in his wisdom decided to start off easy and take up these light subjects: murder, adultery, and divorce.

You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, “Do not commit murder.” Of course, we recognize this to be from the Ten Commandments. I think that was number 6.

Now, Jesus decides to take it further: “but I say to you...”

don't be angry with your brother or sister and don't insult them or call them names. And if someone is holding a grudge against you, you must reconcile with them before coming to the altar of God. Also, reconcile with anyone who has a case against you before you stand before the judge so you won't be put in jail.

Now I don't want to project onto you my short comings but, I know I've called people out of their names and have lobbed an insult or two - especially at some choice politicians. It sure can feel fun, but it can also be very destructive to our relationships and communities. You know, that “don't commit murder” law seems so much easier to obey doesn't it.

Jesus emphasizing the heart and intent of the law. When we begin down the road of responding to our anger towards others in destructive ways, lobbing insults and call them out of their names, we are in effect creating paths toward dehumanization, thus making it easier to do what we want to them.

The always insightful writer and storyteller, Brené Brown writes:

“Dehumanizing often starts with creating an *enemy image*. As we take sides, lose trust, and get angrier and angrier, we not only solidify an idea of our enemy, but also start to lose our ability to listen, communicate, and practice even a modicum of empathy. . .

Dehumanization has fueled innumerable acts of violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocides. It makes slavery, torture, and human trafficking possible. Dehumanizing others is the process by which we become accepting of violations against human nature, the human spirit, and violations against the central tenets of our faith.”¹

So I think, for Jesus, at the heart of the law against murder is that to be in a right relationship with God, we must live respectfully and always working to reconcile our relationships with our neighbors - and all creation.

Ya, it's complicated.

If that wasn't hard enough, Jesus reframes the law against acts of adultery, which follows murder on Moses' top ten list.

You know when I was working on this sermon, I kept coming to the idea of creating a sort of Monty Python dialogue. You know the sketches where something is said and others are dimwittedly asking questions to try to understand what they mean and soon all hilarity ensues? This particular reframing lends itself well for such treatment, but when I ran my idea by a couple of colleagues . . .well, let's just say I rethought the idea. But really, think about it.

¹ <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2018/05/17/dehumanizing-always-starts-with-language/>
adapted from her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, 2017 - chapter 4

Jesus says that every man who even looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart.

Notice the patriarchal language used here. It is important to realize that in the Ancient Middle East (and frankly not so ancient times too - even in the western world) women were understood to be the property of their fathers until they were married when they then became property of their husbands. The main concern against committing adultery was to protect the lineage of the husband. This will come up again in a minute. But for now, Jesus reframes this law to say that just looking lustfully is an act of adultery in a man's heart. It is not just the act but also the intent that is seen as sinful.

Again, Jesus is concerned with the motivations in one's heart that would then lead a person to act in ways that harm the right relationships with their neighbors and community, and therefore harming their right relationship with God.

Remember we were going to come back to the patriarchal societal issue? As if the last two examples weren't complicated enough, Jesus had to bring up the law of divorce.

Now, divorce was an accepted practice even under the Mosaic laws but remember, women were thought of as property. So the law stipulated that a man must give his wife a writ of divorce, a piece of paper that says she is no longer his responsibility. This was supposed to be considered a more humane way of putting a woman out on the curb. She would at least have a chance to find another husband or return to her father or even her older brother if she was so lucky. And a man could divorce his wife for any reason or even no cause, but a woman had no way to divorce her husband.

Jesus, however reframes this law by telling the men in this patriarchal society that it is immoral to divorce a woman without cause of infidelity. Just as the Israelites are expected to be faithful to the covenant they made with Yahweh, the same is expected of the marriage covenant. The husband is to provide for his wife just as Yahweh provides for the Israelites.

So, what then does this say about modern day marriage commitments. Well, It's complicated. But I believe that just as each couple goes into a marriage with the intention for a life long covenant relationship, I also believe that God understands when the covenant relationship is no longer healthy and needs to be reframed or even removed. This, in fact, is a recurring theme in God's relationship with the Israelites. They are continuously unfaithful to God, yet God ensures they are taken care of - even in the hardest of times. Jesus reframes the law on divorce and expects that each person is treated justly and with as little harm done as possible. Like God is just and merciful, we are to be just and merciful to each other in our broken relationships.

Finally, and somewhat related, the fourth law that Jesus reframed was that of a solemn pledge or oath. Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: Don't make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord. But I say to you that you must not pledge at all.

A solemn pledge would require a person to swear - by God or some other authority that what they say or promise is truthful. But Jesus says that you should not swear to anything; that your yes should mean yes and your no should mean no.

If a person says to you, “I swear to God I’m telling the truth.” Then do you wonder if when they aren’t making that solemn pledge if they are being truthful or not?

For Jesus, a person of faith has a truthful heart and their word should stand on its own. Those who must swear a solemn pledge for others to believe them are by nature deceitful people. Living trustworthy lives is key to living in a right relationship with others and with God.

It is easy to say, just keep a clean heart and all will be well, but even the best of us are not capable of living sinless, harmless lives, in right relationships with others and God. No matter how hard we try. In reality, it’s complicated.

What is true and sure is that each of us stands before Jesus Christ as a sinner redeemed, not by our own goodness but by God’s. Daily I fall short of the glory God has envisioned for me, and sometimes I surprise myself because by God’s grace I rise to the occasion and manage to love, to forgive, to live a better life than I ever imagined I could. Then I stumble and fall again and must rely, once again on God’s forgiveness. I stand before these teachings that follow the beatitudes in just the same way: a sinner redeemed by God’s goodness and love, one who falls short, so very short of the grace given to me through Jesus Christ, but also one who has been freed from that sin enough to get up and try again and again to live up to the vision God has for me and for us all.

Let us rise in body or spirit and sing together:

Trust in God and you will be sheltered for eternity;

like a mountain strong and sure, by God’s grace you will endure.