

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 12, 2023 – 6 Epiphany
Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37
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I have to tell you that there are weeks when I read through the scripture lessons assigned for Sunday and I wonder how on earth the people who chose them made their decisions! This is one of those weeks.

First, Sirach – if you choose, you can keep the commandments. Okay, yes, we make choices, and we can choose what is good. Then the psalm – “Happy are they whose way is blameless.” I don’t know a single person who is “happy” by that definition – certainly not me! Then St. Paul – spiritual people vs. people of flesh. What group of people has no quarreling, even if it isn’t expressed? Who doesn’t at some time feel jealousy? Worse and worse. And then Jesus finishes us all off by making difficult commandments virtually impossible to keep! If I take his message literally and to heart, I may be condemned as a serial killer! So, how do we make sense of this? How can these lessons guide our lives? Where is the good news here?

Let’s focus on the Gospel. Our reading from Matthew is a portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In this reading we find Jesus expanding some of the commandments found in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. He used a style of teaching that was common practice among rabbis of his time, the formula “You have heard that it was said,” followed by “but I say to you.” This formula rooted the rabbi’s teaching in scripture and the traditional interpretation of scripture and also provided room for new interpretation and new meaning. We find Jesus referring to familiar commandments from scripture and telling his hearers what more was required. He went to the heart of human behavior, the sources of our wrongdoing.

Jesus speaks first about murder and refers to the sixth of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not murder” or “kill” (Exodus 20:13). Most human beings refrain from murder, so that might seem a relatively easy commandment to keep. Not with Jesus’ expansion of the commandment. “I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” Jesus is directing our attention to what may lie behind murder – anger. He does not condemn the emotion of anger – in fact, the gospels report that Jesus was quite angry himself on a number of occasions. But he warns us about the potential consequence of holding onto anger, of feeding it and growing it until it leads to violence. Perhaps we don’t feed our anger or allow it to turn to violence. Is that good enough? No. Jesus teaches us that if we say, regarding another person, ‘You fool,’ we “will be liable to the hell of fire.” Is there anyone who has not broken this commandment? The contempt for another person behind calling that person a fool – even only in our private thoughts – is contrary to the second Great Commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is the law that Jesus calls us to obey. When we have contempt for a person, when we nurture our anger toward a person, or when we kill a person (in body or in spirit) we fail to honor the person as God’s child, our brother or sister.

Jesus goes on to teach about adultery and divorce. We need first to understand something about marriage in Jesus' time and culture. In ancient Israel, women were considered the property of men, of their father prior to betrothal and marriage and then of their betrothed or husband. One reason that adultery was prohibited was to insure that children were the issue of a woman's husband and not someone else. Another was the protection of a married man's "property."

The seventh of the Ten Commandments is "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Jesus once again directs our attention to what may be behind adultery: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus uses strong language to emphasize the seriousness of lust. Tear out the eye that stimulates desire, cut off the hand that reaches out to take the forbidden partner. The Greek word translated as "lust" can also mean "covet," the word we find in the tenth of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17). To lust or covet is to desire an object or person in such a way that may lead us to take the desired object or person, by stealing or in adultery. One's own selfish desire – "I want" – takes over to the exclusion of ethical principles and of concern for the rights or well-being of others. Jesus leads us to see that this dynamic of human motivation goes far beyond sexual morality and legal property rights, far deeper than breaking the Ten Commandments. It reflects an attitude that is radically self-centered, not God-centered.

In his teaching about divorce Jesus begins in this way: "It was ... said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" This is a reference to the book of Deuteronomy 24:1: "Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house." A certificate of divorce certified that the woman had been divorced by her husband for a cause other than adultery. This allowed her to remarry, and in a world where women needed the support of men, it provided women with some measure of protection.

Jesus says, "But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." This strong language conveys the idea that it is not good enough to obey merely the letter of this law regarding divorce. It is not acceptable to discard a person to whom you have been married with only a small gesture of protection that costs nothing. While ancient laws and understanding of marriage are not relevant to us today, the underlying principle is as relevant now as it ever has been: it is not acceptable to use other human beings and discard them when they are no longer useful or pleasing. Not in marriage, not at all.

How might Jesus' teaching about anger guide our lives? One contemporary understanding of anger is a response to the violation of ourselves or others. When others threaten our well-being, we often feel angry. This kind of anger can help us take care of ourselves and keep ourselves safe. Like everyone else, we are God's children and we believe that God wants our well-being. Our anger may teach us how to protect ourselves. And we can learn from our experience. What has threatened or violated us? Has another person acted in a way that hurts us? If so, we can identify that behavior and resolve not to behave that way toward others. "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you" is another form of the Golden Rule and it is a good rule.

We also feel anger when we learn of the many instances in the world where people's rights, including their right to live, are violated. Sometimes this is called "righteous anger." The energy of this kind of anger can move us to do something to help others, and that is good. It may also lead us to appreciate the many ways in which we are not violated and thus increase our gratitude to God. "There but for the grace of God" is folk wisdom that has value for us today, if we open our minds and hearts to the message.

Jesus' teaching about lust – if we take the broader lesson about covetousness – is very relevant to our time and culture. We are bombarded with stimulants to covetousness! Advertisements stimulate us to want more and more, and in the interest of "the bottom line" we are encouraged by profit-making companies to covet whatever our neighbor possesses that might be more or better than what we possess. I feel how difficult it can be to resist this pressure, and I'm sure you do, too. We need to choose to resist this pressure, not to feed it. And we need to instead nurture our generosity and practice generosity. Instead of focusing on what "I want," we might guide our thoughts to what others need. We can correct our covetousness by encouraging our compassion for others.

The teaching of Jesus in this morning's lesson is very demanding, as it goes to the heart of our relationships with our neighbors and searches our hearts. How can we bear his teaching? We all fall short. We are all guilty. Where is there any hope?

There is a reason I chose "Amazing Grace" as our hymn before the Gospel. "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear:" it is by the light of God's mercy that we see where we fall short. "And grace my fears relieved:" it is the promise of God's freely-given mercy that makes our fears bearable. The teaching of Jesus is sometimes hard, but we are assured that our Teacher is merciful. It is in Christ's mercy, not in our sinlessness, but in Christ's mercy, that we find our abiding hope. After all, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, we have already come; 'tis grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home." Amen.