

## Sixth Sunday after Epiphany February 12 2023

### Matthew 5:21-37

First, remember, you are a beloved child of God with whom God is well pleased. Got it?

Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher of scripture. In this, his first formal session as a rabbi to the disciples, he shows what his approach is to reading scripture.

At the start of his time, Jesus redefines who we see as honorable. That was two weeks ago, it is the poor, the hopeless, the ones who individuals and society deny justice. It is the peace makers, those who strive for God's justice regardless of cost to themselves, those who connect thought and action to live in the reign of heaven.

And last week, it is those who are salt and light. Who preserve, heal, bring out the best in others. The ones who shine a light into dark places, who are steadfast in their witness to the reign of heaven.

With an audience already a bit stunned by this unusual reading, Jesus affirms that he has come not to do away with the Hebrew Bible, but to fulfill it. To call those who follow him to keep those commandments, but in this way. By reading it differently from those who have gone before.

Jesus continues his teaching today by making the point that following God's guidance for how to live with one another is not just about what you do. Anyone can get through life without unjustly killing another human being. But, if you are angry at another, fixed on getting your own back from them- you are liable to the

same punishment as if you had murdered them. If you place them beneath you by insulting them- Knucklehead, moron- you are liable to hell.

Jesus doesn't look at the prohibition against adultery as only being about family structure and inheritance (is that really my kid?). Rather, his understanding is that it is about how we look at others. A curb to our tendency to see others as a means to an end, or an object of our own pleasure. As something other than a fully realized human being, created in the image of God.

This continues in his teaching on divorce. The Hebrew Bible assumes divorce happens and describes a means to codify that. What Jesus seems to do in his teaching is dismiss that transactional process and get at our relations with one another. Note, in Jewish law of the time, it was only the male who could write a certificate of dismissal, for most any reason, and the woman- who was his property- would suddenly be bereft of any support. What Jesus is pointing out is the wrongness of treating another human being (the wife) as something only meant to please you. Here again, diminishing a human being created in God's image into an object.

Human relationship, community, is so important that Jesus says it takes precedence over whatever God requires from us to be in relationship with God. Fix your human relationships before you try and fix the one with God because they are somehow intimately connected. So, even if you are on your way to worship, and you realize that you have wronged someone. Go fix that, reconcile that relationship, before coming to God. Because if we don't, it somehow gets in the way of our relationship with God.

Jesus acknowledges how hard this can be. To see every human being we connect with as one created in the image of God and to treat them that way. That struggle is captured in his hyperbole of tearing out an eye or cutting off a hand. Jesus does not call us to self-mutilate, but acknowledges the reality that Paul talks about in Romans 7. The sin I don't want to do I do, and the things I want to do, I don't do. This struggle is probably reflected in the disciples and the crowd sitting listening to Jesus, squirming in their seats by this time I'm sure.

So, what is Jesus calling us to?

He calls us to be what we are, beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased. He calls us to be pure in heart. To be congruent in who we are both in speech and in action. Both in internal thought and in external life.

I just finished teaching Judeo Christian Journeys for the University of Dubuque again and I found that a consistent critique from those in the class for rejecting the church, if not Christianity as a whole, is the behavior of Christians. Is the incongruity between their professed beliefs- their talk- and their actions. That we are indeed hypocrites.

We speak of love and acceptance, they said, but do not welcome or accept everyone. Especially those who are labeled as sinners. What they find instead is rejection, condemnation, judgement.

And it is not just their perception- although there is some of that. In my time teaching I have heard stories of family members who, I am sure thinking they are doing the faithful thing, have kicked children out of their homes. Have said words

that have cut their family member to the core. Who have dismissed deep suffering and pain.

These two things, the (mistaken) belief that you have to be perfect to be a follower of Jesus. And this (mistaken) belief that God calls us to reject those who sin. To lead with something other than love. Are the ones that consistently do the most harm to others.

Now, I hope we as Christians who happen to be Lutheran are different in that we very clearly understand that not one of us in this room is perfect. Including me. That we all sin and fall short of what God calls us to do and be. If not in outward action, then in inward intent. We know doggone well that we are both saint and sinner and that the very reason we are in this place week after week is we need to be reminded of that reality, to hear again ourselves, God's grace and forgiveness, to be reminded of who we are- beloved child of God with whom God is well pleased, and what we are called to be- followers of Jesus. And to go out into the world strengthened by the Word spoken, sung, proclaimed and by the bread and wine that is Jesus given for us.

Those who lead with something other than love, forget that Jesus' harshest words are for those who are within the religious tradition, but who have totally missed the point. Yet, even when he uses harsh language towards them, Jesus continues to be in relationship with them. Calling them to repent- to change their thinking. His responses are not a belittling or rejection of their humanity, but rather a warning of what will come from their misunderstanding of how God is calling us to live. A frustration, that a beloved child of God would act in this way. Jesus

does what any good sibling does, tries to keep us out of trouble by correcting us. Because he doesn't want to see us hurt.

Jesus' stance, his understanding of what God has always been about, is the reconciliation of the human community. A re-knitting of that oh so important relationship. To recalling for everyone the reality of who they are- created in the image of God. Deserving of love and respect for that reason alone.

This way of seeing people extends into the latter part of the sermon, which we won't get to hear in worship. Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. Why, because God causes the rain to fall on righteous and sinner alike. Because they, too, bear the image of God. What do we pray for them? The same as we pray for us. That we might see the places where we have done wrong, and to make amends. That God might bless those places where our actions match God's will. That they might see us for who we are- created in the image of God- and act accordingly.

This is a difficult but necessary sermon Jesus preaches.

One that I hold before myself, filled with mantras for my interaction with others. Love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you. See them as one created in the image of God. As a whole person, and treat them that way, regardless of how they treat you. Reminders that I am in fact not all that and a bag of chips. That when I get up on my high horse to judge others, Jesus has already pointed out that I am just as guilty. Because I have thought those very things, and in that way, have committed them.

I get frustrated when I hear my UD students talk about their experiences, their perceptions of what followers of Jesus are like. Because I know different. Because I hang with a group of folks who know darn well they are imperfect followers and are always ready to welcome one more. I get frustrated. Because so much of that misunderstanding comes because ours is not the loudest voice in the room. Because we as a people do not give voice and action to what Jesus calls us to in this sermon.

To community. Community like we are called to be in the reign of heaven.

Community, which is the only expression of the reign of heaven. It is not good that man should be alone. God, from the beginning, calls us into relationship with one another. To love one another in deed and truth- even when that person seeks to do you harm. To seek reconciliation with someone we have a beef with, because when our relationships with one another are out of whack, our relationship with God suffers.

What Jesus lays out in this sermon, his first in Matthew, is a roadmap to be what we are- beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased. It is difficult. But it is easier when we are in it together. When we encourage one another. Correct one another. Love one another. Which is part of the point.

If you get nothing else from this sermon of Jesus, remember this. As followers of Jesus, when in doubt, love. Even your enemy. Even the one who insults you. Even the guy who cut you off in traffic. Love in a way that sees them as one created in the image of God. As one beloved by God.

Because that is what you are. Beloved of God. With whom God is well pleased.