February 16, 2014

Matthew 5:21-37

*How do we live?*

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**Matthew 5:21-37 (The Message)
21-22**“You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

**23-24**“This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

**25-26**“Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won’t get out without a stiff fine.

**27-28**“You know the next commandment pretty well, too: ‘Don’t go to bed with another’s spouse.’ But don’t think you’ve preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your *heart* can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your *body*. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

**29-30**“Let’s not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here’s what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

**31-32**“Remember the Scripture that says, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights’? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are ‘legal.’ Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you’re responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you’re automatically an adulterer yourself. You can’t use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

**33-37**“And don’t say anything you don’t mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.”

 Someone once caught American comedian WC Fields reading the Bible. "What are you doing?" asked the person. "Looking for loopholes," growled Fields. Well, Jesus has gotten into meddling now. Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount so well, “Blessed be the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” “you are the salt of the earth,” “you are the light of the world”, but now…. well… he is meddling! When Kristi Hassell and I were talking about this worship service, she said to me, “I really don’t have any good hymns to go with divorce, adultery, and murder!” These are hard verses. Who among us has not been on the wrong side of anger, bitterness, and jealousy? Who among us has not thought at least one person a fool? Who among us has continued to pray and go to church when we have had broken relationships in our lives?

 I am reminded of the words from the Apostle Paul in Romans 3, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” But what is the sin? Jesus is telling us it’s not enough to be faithful in our acts of religious devotion. Our acts of piety - our praying, our scripture reading, our taking of communion or fasting, our living in Christian community - as well as our acts of charity when we are feeding the hungry and clothing those who need clothes and housing those who are homeless, all of those acts aren’t pleasing apart from being in healthy relationships and in good standing with one another. It’s about relationships. Jesus is not just encouraging us, Jesus is insisting that we figure out how to be about the ministry of reconciliation, how can we reconcile between people who we are divided and in conflict with?

 My parents divorced when I was two and I really do not remember a lot about my dad’s second wife, but when he married his third wife I was 11. I did not like my stepmom. It was not any reflection on her. I do not think I would have liked anyone that he would have married. During my teenage years I did not feel close to my stepmom. When I was 16 years old, my stepmom and I were trying to have a conversation and I was not really saying much, and she looked at me and grabbed my hand and said, “Kerry, I pray for you every single day. I am so glad that God brought you into my life.” Well, I did not know what to say or do. How could I not like someone that prayed for me every single day? I had to figure out a way to have a relationship with her and not avoid her. She was not going away, and I was going to have to get to know her.

 It’s hard to stay mad at someone and it’s hard to continue pursuing conflict when you find out that person is praying for you. I want you to think of someone that you are in conflict with. It should not be too difficult to think of just one person that you are angry with. Now, I want you to imagine that person giving you Communion. Imagine that person saying to you the words of reconciliation, the body of Christ, given for you, the blood of Christ, poured out for you. The Communion table is a place to become reconciled. Do you think that you could still be angry with them after celebrating the gift of Communion together? Do you think that you could pray for them by name every single day until you figure out how to have a relationship with them?

The hard truth of the matter is when we are in community with other people, we are inevitably in conflict. A pastor was asked about his Church membership. "We have 800 members," he said. "How many active members?" the questioner asked. "All of them," the pastor replied. "1/2 are working with me and 1/2 are working against me."  I read an article this week in Christianity Today that I referenced in my e newsletter where the author Doug Bursch said, “I don't quite know what size your church expression should look like, but I assume it should be small enough to know some people and big enough to be annoyed by others.” There might possibly be some people in this church family that you are in conflict with or that you find annoying. Conflict is built into our DNA.  It is inherent in human existence.  We should expect conflict in our life because conflict is there. But if we are willing to take up the ministry of reconciliation, it will change our lives.

 So, back to the murder, adultery and divorce. Jesus is turning conventional wisdom on its head. Jesus says our real problem is not ultimately murder, but the anger that lies at its core.  Jesus says our real problem is not ultimately adultery, but the lust in our hearts.  Jesus says our real problem is not when to allow divorce, but the brokenness of our relationships. In Jesus’ time a husband could divorce his wife for any reason, even for burning the bread – I am not kidding. A husband could simply walk out or throw his wife out. The law favored the man and left the woman destitute and powerless. Women in Jesus’ time were dependent on their father and then their husband for their daily livelihood. These verses about divorce have been used to make women feel guilty for leaving abusive marriages or having been left by their husbands. But Jesus is reinforcing the dignity of women and warns against a culture of male privilege. Jesus does not see women as property, but disciples.

Jesus’ words are not meant to leave us with perpetual guilt over a divorced status. A relationship is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for each other. In Jesus’ day the customs and practices of divorce were a direct assault on those values. Wisdom is needed in applying Jesus' words for today in those instances when exiting an untenable, abusive, loveless relationship is more in keeping with the heart of the law than staying in it. Following Jesus is about seeing God picking up the pieces of our shattered lives and forming them into something new and something wonderful.

 Jesus’ words about anger assume that anger does not have power over us unless we consent, unless we allow anger entry into our hearts. Anger is not to be hidden or disregarded. Nor should we foolishly act upon its impulses. Anger should instead be dealt with by becoming the opportunity for repairing broken relationships. There was a church where the preacher and the pianist were not getting along. This began to spill over into the worship service. One week the preacher preached on commitment, and how all should step out and dedicate themselves to service.  The pianist responded by leading the song, "**I Shall Not Be Moved.**"  The next Sunday, the preacher preached on giving and how all should gladly give financially so that the work of the Lord might be supported. The pianist followed with the song, "***Jesus* Paid It All…**"  The next Sunday, the preacher preached on gossiping and how believers should watch our tongues. The pianist then led the congregation in the song, "**I Love To Tell The Story**"!  Finally the preacher became disgusted over the situation, so the next Sunday he told the congregation he was considering the possibility of resigning. The pianist led a spirited rendition of the song, "**Oh, Why Not Tonight?**"  So, the preacher did indeed stand before the church the next week, informing them that the Lord Jesus had led him to resign. The pianist solemnly led the congregation in all stanzas of "**What a Friend We Have in Jesus…**"

When I went to church when I was younger it seemed like paradise.  There was no screaming, there was only love and acceptance.  It felt like an oasis of hugs!  It is still an oasis of hugs, but I know now that like anywhere else in this world, there is conflict in this place.  Have you ever witnessed or been a part of conflict in the church?  In my mind, this community is the best thing that is going on, I want to be a part of this hospital for sinners.  I want to be in this place where there are all kinds of people and the greatest thing that we have in common is our love for God and our love for our neighbors.  We praise God together and we serve God together.

A man once embarked on a sea voyage around the world. Partway through his journey, he encountered a terrible storm. His vessel capsized and was ripped apart, but luckily he was able to swim to a small island. After a bit of exploration, he discovered that he was the only inhabitant of the island. He also discovered that there was sufficient animal life and vegetation on the island to support his life. So, in true *Gilligan's Island* fashion, he built a new life for himself on that island.  10 years passed. One day, the man was stunned to see a ship approaching the island: He was being rescued! Before long, a team of rescuers strolled onto the island, and the shipwrecked man met them on the beach.  They stated: "We are here to rescue you and the others."  The man declared, "That's fantastic! …but there are no 'others.' I am the only person on this island."  The rescuers looked confused. They said, "Sir, just ahead of us we see, not 1, but *3 buildings*. How is it that you dwell on this island all alone, yet have constructed 3 different buildings?"  The man said, "I will explain. The 1st building? That is my home. That's where I eat and sleep. The 2nd building? That is my church. That's where I pray and worship."  He paused. The rescuers prompted him: "Well, then, what is the 3rd building?"  The man replied, "*Oh, that's the church I used to attend, until I got mad at 'em and changed my membership…*"

 Jesus is not giving us a new list of rules, but he is talking about the intentions of the law. Jesus is telling us that the law needs to be kept in our heart. In Matthew 6:21, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”. Jesus wants us to have whole-hearted love of God and neighbor.

Jesus wants his disciples to be people of integrity, people who are faithful to their promises, people who have no need to swear that they are telling the truth because they are truth-tellers. The women in their midst are not people to be used and abandoned at will, but fellow disciples.

 How do we live? Jesus confronts us with choices, each carrying its own consequences. Jesus calls us to reconcile with one another, to love faithfully, and to speak truthfully. God does expect much from us. As the body of Christ, we are not only called and expected but also empowered through the Holy Spirit and each other’s watchful love to live fully in the way of life, fully in the ways of the kingdom of God revealed by Jesus.

On Christmas Eve night the Christ Candle was lit as a reminder to all of that the Christ child was born, that our Savior has come into the world to redeem us, to make us whole, and to bring us peace. As we walk as a child of the light may we know that Christ walks with us, giving us strength for the journey ahead.