

Matthew 5, Deuteronomy 30-How community gets along February 16, 2020

So, with Valentine's Day falling on a Friday this year, this weekend has maybe been a kind of Valentine's weekend. Probably a number of us celebrated in some manner or other. At our clergy text study group last Wednesday, a Pastor who recently lost their spouse was commenting that Valentine's Day, like Christmas, can be a tough time for those who may feel alone or lonely. And apparently in recognition of this reality, some restaurants featured two menus for this past Friday evening's dinner out: a Valentine's menu, and an anti-Valentine's menu. I guess where the Valentine's menu featured surf and turf, wine, and candlelight, the anti-Valentine's menu featured burgers and fries with beer, aimed for those who might not have a sweetheart for the night, but didn't want to feel left out of going out in honor of the occasion. This led me to think about how our texts this morning are kind of anti-Valentine's texts, aren't they? On this weekend of love, dove, hearts, blisses, and kisses, we have this text in Matthew that hammers away at us about lust, adultery, and divorce; to say nothing of murder, anger, and deceit. Definitely these words would fall into the anti-Valentine's portion of the menu, I'd have to conclude.

Now, alert listeners might recall that I said it would be this way last week. I mentioned then, as we considered the portion of the Sermon of the Mount prior to these verses, that Jesus' words tend to fall into one of three categories: words we like, words we find hard to believe, and words we don't like and wish he'd never said. And I gave fair warning that the texts for today would be falling into that final category: words we don't like and wish Jesus hadn't said. Because on any weekend,

much less Valentine's weekend, these are hard words to hear. So, why did Jesus say them? Presumably because we need to hear them. Why do we need to hear them? Let's explore that a bit.

Taken in conjunction with our lesson from Deuteronomy, both of our Scripture texts hold up for us God's vision of how we ought to live within community. Both lessons insist that we are not lone wolves. It's not all about us. And how we live will either honor God and serve our neighbor's good, or it will not. Both the Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy and the Gospel lesson from Matthew are reliant upon *these 2* basic assumptions: God created us to live in community, and our choices and behavior impact that community. Those are important assumptions—we should not pass over them lightly-- because while they are *Biblical*, they are *not* necessarily *cultural*. Our culture loves the idea of independence, of claiming our rights, and how often do we hear, "I can do as I please. It's a free country. I'm not hurting anyone"? Moreover, our culture has increasingly made ethics so much a matter of individual context, that we can easily delude ourselves into thinking that really, what we do and how we live doesn't matter to God *or* those around us. Jesus' words in Matthew here, then, are not merely anti-Valentine's words in their blunt and critical tone; they are counter cultural; they insist that we are responsible to God and others for how we choose to live. It's really not all about just us.

Looking more closely at this text from Matthew, we encounter Jesus speaking to a series of four legal topics that were relevant to Jews: murder, adultery, divorce, and lying. All of these subjects are covered in the 10 Commandments and in

many other places within the Scripture of the Old Testament, to which good Jews, including Jesus, adhered. Jesus begins his teaching on each of these topics with the same phrase, “You have heard that it was said...”, “but I say to you”. In other words, he first makes reference to the Old Testament teaching on the subject at hand, and *then* he expands on it from His own perspective. Here’s the kicker, though: he doesn’t make any of the laws easier. He doesn’t say that any of them don’t matter or shouldn’t be followed. Instead, he actually raises the bar in each instance; he makes them *harder*. He digs more deeply into each commandment, not merely asking that we observe the letter of the law, so to speak, but that we take to heart that *spirit behind* the law. Which is setting the bar much higher.

Now the verses which particularly grab our attention initially are those that deal with sexual or romantic relationships, those words about lust and adultery, and especially about divorce and re-marriage--since any number of us are divorced or remarried. I actually want to focus more on what *else* Jesus says in these verses, but given the impact of the verses on divorce, let’s briefly consider them. As we know, Scripture speaks of marriage in a way that evolves throughout the writing of the Scriptures. Which makes sense, because after all, the Scriptures were written over a period exceeding 1000 years. In the Old Testament, for example, polygamy was a common practice. It was a man’s world, and a fortunate man might have many wives. Or he might have relations with other women who were not wives, maybe some of the maidservants within his home perhaps, in order to bear children. This was considered socially, morally, and legally acceptable. Furthermore, although marriage was taken

seriously, the dissolving of a marriage, only at the *husband's* request, was allowable, sometimes for reasons as significant as infidelity or as ridiculous as the wife being a poor cook.

In the New Testament, Jesus regarded marriage as part of God's intentions for human companionship and intimacy. He also took marriage very seriously; so seriously that he speaks against the divorce practices of the 1st C. Now it seems from this text that Jesus, in giving this law, gave some thought to protecting the position of women in his society. He saw that living in fear of divorce and abandonment at the whim of a husband was not a happy state for many women in the 1st Century. The giving of the certificate of divorce had deteriorated into making the dissolving of a marriage—again at the choice of the man only---a convenient out for any dissatisfied husband. So rather than making divorce easier, he makes it harder. Jesus, in our text today, is both affirming the sacred and lasting nature of the marriage covenant, and also shoring up the position and value of women. In God's eyes, divorce should never be the casual ending of a relationship for matters of convenience for just one of the partners; it is a significant brokenness and it impacts not just the couple, but a whole lot of family and community members around them. And if we think about it, I doubt we really wish that Jesus had instead suggested that relationships can be ended without much thought or care, and that no one will be negatively impacted. That's just not true. The health of individuals and the community matter, and our actions within our intimate relationships impact both. That's the *spirit* of the law behind the letter of this law: God is interested in protecting human community and the vulnerable within that community.

But moving on, I'd also like us to consider what *else* Jesus is saying in this passage, words that tend to get overlooked as we immediately focus in on the divorce and re-marriage sections. Because in the initial verses, Jesus speaks about the underlying causes of violence, as epitomized in murder; and in the final verses, Jesus speaks about the importance of telling the truth, of meaning what we say. And I have to believe that both of those topics are extremely timely to our current situations and perhaps intertwined.

I mentioned that Christ's words in this section of Matthew mirror many of the 10 commandments. Obviously, he references the commandment "thou shalt not kill" when he said in the first section of today's lesson, "You have heard it said, "You shall not murder," but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire." Oh man, again—don't you wish Jesus hadn't said this? I mean, most of us can avoid actually murdering someone. But Jesus digs much more deeply into the roots of violence and murder when he broadens the bad behavior to include nursing anger against someone, insulting someone, or being contemptuous towards someone. And that's asking so much more of us than simply not killing. Again, why does he say this? Because we need to hear it. And why do we need to hear it? Could it be because it is that deeply held anger, that attitude of insult and contempt towards others, that leads to violence and killing? A culture that indulges in contemptuous, angry, disrespectful behavior as a common practice is nurturing values and attitudes that lead to violence, isn't it? And doesn't our culture seem to be becoming

just such a culture? And aren't all of us, individually, a part of that larger tendency to hold in contempt those of differing viewpoints or values; to stoke up anger and indignation towards others to a point where it can easily break out into actions that are destructive towards community, individuals, and God's intent for our world? These are words that challenge and convict us.

As are Christ's words about telling the truth at the end of our lesson. He references the notion that if one is speaking out of a vow to God---we might say, if one speaks having sworn on a stack of Bibles---that one is supposed to tell the truth but otherwise one can deceive. And he states that this is hardly God's intention for our speech! Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no, Jesus says. Don't use words to hide the truth, slant the truth, or take cover from the truth. Just say what you mean and be honest to your word.

Well, here again, these verses are at odds with our surroundings, as we live in an era where words seem to be used more often to confuse or dilute the facts, to propagate "fake news", to provide cover for what we really mean or intend to do. Plain speaking and truth telling are not widely valued by our culture, and most likely, we are a part of this trend as individuals, too. We easily fall into the trap of using our words to water down the truth rather than to tell it. In fact, Martin Luther does a nice job of enlarging on the importance of honest words in his Small Catechism, where he writes in regards to the commandment to not lie, "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray, slander, or hurt their reputation, but defend them, speak well of them, and interpret their actions in the most charitable way possible." Well,

how hard is that? Haven't we all fallen into the habit of suspecting the worst of our neighbors, our leaders, our public figures? Don't we almost gleefully interpret everything in the least charitable way possible and then gossip about it? Honoring the spirit behind these laws is so much harder than simply not killing someone or not lying unless under oath....and yet it is exactly these small behaviors that will either trend towards community health and well being or else towards eroding the health and well being of the community, filling it instead with spite, malice, and deceit....which ultimately leads to violence or faithlessness or the destruction of human community. Every little choice we make, every step we take down the road of contempt or deceit leads us that much further towards larger and more destructive expressions of those sins. Avoiding that is exactly what God is up to in giving us laws in the first place. In giving law, God isn't interested in being punitive; why would God be? God is interested in setting boundaries that will foster life and well being for everyone. That's why passages like these, hard though they are to hear, need to be spoken and need to be heard, even on Valentine's weekend---they urge us to choose life and blessing, rather than death and curse. And they challenge us to dig deeper than merely obeying the letter of the law, but rather to embrace the spirit of the law....which is to protect the vulnerable, to promote the common good, and to safe-guard human community. Will we always succeed in reaching this high bar? Obviously and self-evidently, not! Is forgiveness available, are second chances always possible with God? Of course. And we all, every one of us, need both forgiveness and second chances in abundance. All of that is true, but so is this: that

seeking to make life-giving, faithful and moral choices is the calling of every person of faith; because we are always called to honor God and serve our neighbor. Amen.