

February 12, 2017: The Great Invitation: This is Not That Sermon



Since the beginning of the New Year, we've been spending time in worship hearing from Jesus as he interacts with – calls - and teaches his early disciples. Over the last two weeks, we've heard Jesus teaching within the Sermon on the Mount about who is blessed in the Kingdom of God and how we are called to be salt and light, shining brightly for all to see the glory of God revealed in us. Starting today, we'll spend the last two weeks of our series on some of the more challenging teachings of Jesus to see what we can learn from them for our faith journeys.

In our Gospel reading today, we hear Jesus reinterpreting a few of the Ten Commandments, particularly the ones that deal with our interactions and relationships with people in our lives; our neighbors, spouses, friends, and even the people we struggle with. For some of the commandments, he kicks it up a notch, expanding the scope and making it harder to live into – for example, "you have heard it said, 'You shall not murder,' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgement,' but I say to you 'if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement.'" The consequences are heightened even more if your anger spills over into an insult or name calling. According to Jesus, adultery occurs not only by acting on our desires, but simply by thinking them or looking at another lustfully. He speaks strongly about divorce and about perjury, warning us off swearing in the first place, saying to simply let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no."

While we could get caught up in the specifics of each one of these "you have heard it said"s, I invite us to take a step back to see what point Jesus might be trying to make by these reinterpretations. These basic laws of communal living that Moses came back down Mt. Sinai with, speak of how we live in community together – our relationships with God and our neighbors. They communicate that our relationships matter to God... how we treat one another matters! Murder, jealousy, adultery, stealing, taking God's name in vain, etc... These commandments don't exist simply for the law's sake, they exist to uphold the respect and healthy relationships of all people – both with God and with one another. Relationships are damaged through jealousy and cheating, someone is always hurt by the actions or inactions of others when any of these things occur...

The whole Mosaic law is actually a way of pointing us toward healthy relationships with God and others. But somehow we forget that, and we get so caught up in keeping the law for the law's sake. We all know of some laws that we observe simply because we have to... not because we really care about what the law is trying to accomplish. I can think of a few times when I've been late heading to one place or another and that Speed Limit sign feels more like a punishment and restriction than a way of keeping every one the road safe. When finances are tight and each penny counts, the tax laws can feel like they're sucking me dry from all angles... rather than my contributions to a healthy society with public schools, safe roads and care for those struggling even more than I am. If we really thought about it, we'd see that some laws are not only trying to keep us out of trouble but actually help us care for one another. When our focus stays simply on

the law itself, we don't often look past it to see it's intentions – what it's trying to accomplish.

Law understood primarily in legal terms, you see, ends up being a moral and all-too-often self-justifying check list: "No murder today; check! No adultery; check! I'm good!" Jesus wants more from us. Actually, Jesus wants more for us. He wants us to regard each other as God regards us and thereby to treat each other accordingly. Jesus is calling us to look beyond the law to see its goal and end: the life and health of our neighbor! He calls us to envision life in God's kingdom as more than simply law abiding citizens, but rather as a connection of neighbors, and strangers alike, who truly care about the welfare of others, trusting that they are doing the same for us.

"You shall not murder..." It's not enough... We should treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful words.

"You shall not commit adultery..." It is not enough... We should not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.

"Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce..." It is not enough... We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable – which in Jesus day meant women and children -- are provided for.

"You shall not swear falsely" It is not enough... We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all.

God is not interested in us keeping the law for the law's sake, but rather God cares that we keep the law for our sake. This is about moving beyond simply doing "good enough", living by the laws and rules of our religion, but rather, it's about "falling in love with the lifestyle" that Jesus taught about – love lived out in all aspects of our lives. This is about the internals, our motivations for why we do what we do, why we live the way we live. We choose to live into the lifestyle that Jesus teaches, about reconciliation and living in healthy and loving relationships because we are motivated by the love of Christ, by the forgiveness that we are offered, and by the hope of transformation that is available to all!

If Jesus really means what he says, then God cares a whole lot about our relationships and how we treat one another... so much that God would rather have us tend those relationships than come to the altar to make our sacrifice (or in our day, come to church for worship). And if God cares that much, then maybe we need to look closely and carefully at our relationships and how we treat each other – those close to us AND those we struggle with.

I'd like to invite us all into some time for reflection and sharing with one another. First, I'd like you to think of one relationship in your life that is most important to you. One that is healthy and whole and good and feeds your spirit. I'd like you to think about what makes it good and healthy? What do you give and receive to maintain its health? What are you most thankful to God for about that relationship? If you're not sitting by anyone right now, I invite you to shift around if necessary, because I'd like you to share your reflections on that relationship with someone around you. You're only going to have

two minutes to do this – so be sure you make time for everyone to have chance to speak. – I'll call you back together in two minutes, starting now...

(Reflect back on what people were sharing...)

Now, with those thoughts of healthy, whole relationships on mind, I invite you think of another relationship that is important to you but has suffered some damage. Now, you don't need to figure out who was to blame for the hurt, but simply hold that person and relationship in prayer. Simply offer that broken relationship to God with an invitation for God's help and healing. With Jesus' words about anger, reconciliation, respect, fidelity, and honesty fresh in mind, I invite you to think and pray about what action you might take to move that relationship to greater health. As we move into our time of prayer today, hold tight to those thoughts and prayers, and offer them up for God's healing and love to pour out upon you and those you love. May God's love and grace bind up our places of brokenness and lead us into healthy and whole relationships with one another. Amen.