

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 ~ Matthew 5:21-37

But I Say to You

February 16, 2020 ~ 6th Sunday after Epiphany ~ Service of Healing & Wholeness

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture

OK, “Salt of the Earth” and “Light of the World,” time to talk turkey. Today’s scripture finds us still up on the mountain, twenty verses into Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount.” At this point, he is ready to spell out just how his disciples must shine that light all the way down into the nitty gritty of human relationships: anger, lust, adultery, divorce, lying. Yes, the bad stuff. The hard stuff.

Although this is a difficult scripture lesson to hear (and to preach), there is, of course, Good News in this text. Really good news. Good news for any of us who have navigated, or are currently in the midst of difficult, painful, confusing life situations and challenges. There is especially good news here for women and for *anyone* who has been disempowered, victimized or objectified. But you may not hear it as good news when I read this text. Truthfully, when these verses have been read legalistically, literally and out of context, they have caused harm and hurt for many in the church over the years. My hope is that today’s message will help us move from the literal sense to the deeper intention in this teaching of Jesus’. So, get ready to go deep.

Now is the moment, you “Salt of the Earth” and “Light of the World,” for us to open our hearts and invite our minds to listen for what Jesus is saying to us, through this reading of the Gospel, this day.

Sermon

There once was a spiritual teacher sitting with some of his students when a man came and said, “Teacher, I have a question.” “Speak, my son,” said the teacher. The man said: “I was gambling yesterday and got caught cheating at cards. So, my partners beat me up and threw me out of the second story window. What would you advise me to do? The spiritual teacher looked straight through the man and said, “If I were you, from now on, I would play cards on the ground floor.” This startled the students. One said, “But Teacher, why didn’t you tell him to stop gambling?” The teacher answered, “Because I knew he wouldn’t stop.”ⁱ

Jesus knows us. He knows what we can and cannot do. And still, he looks at us and sees in us Light of the World. That is absolutely true. But so is this: We are shockingly adept at making bad choices. Again and again. Sometimes really bad ones. As much as we try not to, we are going to hurt one another. Jesus knew this. God’s chosen people had been trying to follow the ten commandments delivered to Moses on Mt. Sinai already for about 1200 years continuously up to the day Jesus was teaching, again like Moses, but on another mountain.

And on that day, with 1200 years of tradition under their belts, Jesus is not replacing those laws. As he had just said, I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to

fulfill them. And now he is spelling out what that looks like. Although this series of teachings are known as “the antitheses” because of the framing language: “You have heard that it was said....but I say to you,” they really are *not* antitheses because he is not setting up opposites. Nor is he replacing the old laws with new ones. To see them as such is inaccurate and has led over the years to dangerous and toxic anti-Semitism. Jesus is actually intensifying the reach and depth of these commandments. Rather than replacing them, Jesus is cranking up the heat on them. He is reaching behind the letter of the law to the intent. The intent of the law, which is *always* to grow in us, to bring forth through us: a deeper love of God, neighbor, and self.

In each section he takes the existing law and explains how the Light of the World works in the mud and muck of real life. All of these antitheses address some various ways we fracture relationships through the abuse or misuse of power. When we get angry at another person, when we insult them, call them names; when we succumb to lust, adultery, and double talk--we fracture relationships: with others, with God, and with ourselves. These are the sins that shatter creation. These are the sins that deal death to our spirits, and sometimes also to our bodies.

Jesus was shining a light then to that specific crowd, who were living in that time and culture, and is shining a light for us today. He was telling them and us what Love commands to bring life out of these death-dealing situations. I am choosing to focus today on the section about divorce, because of the misunderstandings it had and continues to provoke about divorce, a reality of life that has touched, I’m willing to bet, all of us in this room, in one way or another. It is important to begin by understanding some of the differences surrounding divorce between the ancient world, and ours today. Jesus is addressing specifically men in this section. We know this, in part, because women could not own property or enter into contracts. A wife was considered as property of the husband. And the husband was her soul source of food, shelter, and safety. Divorce could mean that a woman became homeless and impoverished. In the ancient world men could divorce women, but women could not divorce men.

Men, on the other hand were allowed to “release” women for the most trivial reasons, therefore divorce would seem very different for women than men. Women had to hope they did not cause displeasure to their husbands, even in a single burned meal, while men knew that they were free for whatever sort of serial monogamy or hidden polygamy they found amusing. This was the “on the ground” problem with the surface-level interpretation of the law, that Jesus was addressing.

Understanding this immediate context helps us realize: He is not simply forbidding divorce. The heart of his action is to forbid a practice that puts women in danger, a practice that often could have led to prostitution. Then, and now, abject poverty coupled with zero network of support system lead women into sex work. Another way to see Jesus’ prohibition against divorce here, is that he is forbidding most importantly any practice that puts people at risk through the abuse of power. This reading, lines up with the theme throughout the biblical prophets as the basic crime that God condemns: the attacking of those who cannot defend themselves.ⁱⁱ

God was and is for monogamy. However, the truth is that some marriages are beyond repair. And some legal marriages were never marriages of soul and spirit. Other marriages become toxic to the spirit and the body. Divorce is always painful. However, I believe Jesus would say to us now that divorce can become not only the lesser of two evils, but God's ultimate will for the wellbeing of the two individuals caught up in a relationship where it is stuck in behaviors that are diminishing and demeaning or worse. How do we find this truth in the gospel text? By looking beyond the literal, time-bound context to find the deeper ocean of transcultural and eternal truth. This can be summed up and summoned forth by the "Rule of Love." This rule is the through-line, from Genesis through Revelation: The first and greatest commandment to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. "Just as Jesus says "But I say to you." in this passage to those men on the mountain, seated before him, this is also a call to ask ourselves this day, "What is Jesus saying to us here and now?" We are not given a formula, we are given a relationship.

Howard Thurman, once dean of Howard University, told a story of his grandmother. She was old enough to have lived during the time of slavery in the South.

My regular chore was to do all of the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write... with a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves... always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as his text: "Slaves be obedient to your masters... as unto Christ." Then he would go on to show, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would never read that part of the Bible.ⁱⁱⁱ

She was instinctively following the "Rule of Love" and knew that the white pastor's interpretation of the scripture did not line up. She knew that slavery could not be God's intention. It did not square with the God's command to love, or God's creation of every human in God's image. If justifying chattel slavery was what that scripture really meant, how could it be gospel?

I have one more story to share told by a woman named Rudi Thomas. She wrote about the time she was twelve years old. Her mother had a pot full of water and potatoes on the stove to boil for supper. About that time, her husband called her to come and help with a chore. As she went out the door, she told her daughter to watch the potatoes boiling on the stove. The writer says that when she was growing up, she was always taught to follow instructions. So she did exactly what she was told to do—she watched the potatoes boiling on the stove.

She said it must have been 45 minutes or an hour later when her parents finally came back into the kitchen and discovered thick smoke—and their daughter leaning against the refrigerator—watching the potatoes boiling on the stove. Her mother grabbed the pot and raced outside while her father opened up all the doors and windows to clear the air. When her

other tried to dump the potatoes, they wouldn't come out of the pot—they were like six hard granite black cannonballs. With an angry look on her face the mother asked the daughter what she was thinking! The daughter replied, "I did just what you told me to do, Mom—I watched the potatoes boiling on the stove."^{iv}

Always taking words literally can be disastrous, not only one's evening supper. This scripture is a prime example. Here in the 21st century we face many, tough moral questions, such as: When does life begin? When does it end? What would Jesus say to us about abortion, gun violence, immigration policy, the opioid crisis, climate change, racial discrimination, homophobia, genetic engineering, gender identity, xenophobia? The Bible is not an "answer book" in the sense that you can look up any of these issues in the index and find your answer.

At the same time, the Bible is our ultimate source of guidance and truth. It is how we approach scripture that makes all the difference in the world. If we approach it legalistically or as if it's magic, we misuse it. We dishonor it. If instead, we interpret all scripture, asking ourselves "but what is Jesus saying to us?" we are able to let the scriptures be the living, breathing, life-sustaining Word of God, rather than a static rule book. Isn't that what we all need? Let us listen together, so that we may discern together what Jesus is saying to us, today.

ⁱ I found this story in E. Wayne McLaughlin's unpublished sermon titled, "The Exception Clause"

ⁱⁱ Richard Swanson, "Provoking the Gospel" blog post for Feb. 16, 2020, 6th Sunday after Epiphany

ⁱⁱⁱ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Beacon Press: Boston, MA, 1976), p.30.

^{iv} This story also comes from, "The Exception Clause," see first endnote.