

“The Internal Matters”

Matthew 5:21-30

Today is Pentecost Sunday. It marks what we call the birthday of the Church, when Christ’s promise of the Holy Spirit descended upon the first Christians in Jerusalem and empowered them for living and preaching the Gospel--that Jesus Christ is Lord and the hope of salvation and renewal. It took place 50 days after Jesus’ Resurrection and 10 days after his Ascension. We call this event Pentecost because it took place at the time of the Jewish festival of Pentecost which was celebrated 50 days after Passover. There is an interesting similarity to what the Jews were celebrating then and what the Church has come to celebrate by this name. Let me explain.

All of Israel’s festivals--in ancient times and now--celebrate God’s acting in their behalf. Passover celebrated the Exodus and freedom from slavery in Egypt and safe pas-sage--God’s salvation--through the sea. Fifty days later, Israel was at the foot of Mt. Sin-ai where Moses went up and brought down God’s Law, God’s instruction for his people to share life together and to carry out God’s saving purposes in the world. In the Book of Acts we have a parallel to that. During Holy Week, which concludes with Easter, we celebrate our freedom and safe passage--God’s salvation--by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Forty days later--Ascension Day, which we marked last Sunday--we celebrate Jesus ascending to heaven to become Lord and rule the world. Then--10 days after his Ascension--and 50 days after Easter, Jesus came down again, not with a written law cut in stone, but by his Spirit to empower us--the church--with Himself and His word written in our hearts to share life together and carry out his saving purposes for the world.

So now we come to this teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:21-48. Immediately preceding these verses, Jesus told his disciples to be the “*salt of the earth*” and “*light of the world,*” (5:13-16). Immediately preceding those verses, Jesus gave the Beatitude declarations, what living in his kingdom looks like. In fact, he was teaching his disciples--and US, too--to be, to live, as he himself was. In these next verses (vss. 21-48), Jesus continues that line of teaching, but in a different style. He does it by teaching a deeper meaning of righteousness, that is, a kind of righteous living, as he said, that “*surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees/teachers of the Law,*” (vs. 20).

Now this portion of Jesus’ teaching is called the “Six Antitheses” because Jesus sets against—hence antithesis—his teaching with Jewish understanding of the Law in his day. We see Jesus citing a law from the Old Testament and its accepted understanding with “*you have heard it said.*” He then contrasts it with his teaching, “*But I say unto you.*” Like a rabbi or Teacher, which he was, Jesus teaches something strikingly different for those who follow him—and therefore for us. As the sermon title indicates, Jesus addresses internal matters in these first two antitheses--matters of the heart, our inner selves. When I read these verses, I am reminded of Johnny Cash’s, “*I keep a close watch on this heart of mine. I keep my eyes wide open all the time; I keep the ends out for the tie that binds...I walk the line.*”

Jesus addresses two examples of behavior in regard to others that deepen and fulfill the meaning of God’s righteous will for his people. Jesus begins with the citation of the law, “*You shall not commit murder,*” the 6th of the Ten Commandments. But he says really that mere outward observance of the law is not nearly enough. Jesus knew

this world--and well. People of his day had their divisions, prejudices, fears and hatreds no different from our times. Romans insulting Jews, Samaritans attacking Jews, Jews fighting back, different Jewish parties insulting and attacking each other. Lines of division often ran through towns, through families, and even households.

When people are insecure—as during military occupation, which was the case for the Jews in their day--or their fears are raised about others different from them, people often feel themselves to be very insecure. They become jumpy, and react badly to any-thing that looks like aggression or threat to what they know. People often take this insecurity home. The boss shouts at the executive; the executive shouts at the secretary; the secretary takes it home and shouts at the children; and the children kick the poor dog. The cycle goes on and on and on. We all know it at some level, and most of us even know that to be mature, means to recognize the anger for what it is and why, and to stop it before it gets out of control. Sadly, often we don't act with maturity. It's true of people in families; it's true of whole peoples and nations, also. We can always justify OUR anger, OUR resentments, OUR contempt!!!

But hear the good news! There's another, better way. What we see Jesus doing is showing us a new way of being fully, genuinely, and wonderfully HUMAN. This new way goes down to the roots of personality and produces a different pattern of behavior. Jesus goes first to the root of murder. It begins with smoldering anger against someone--not anger in itself—which may be justified at times. Jesus himself got angry. It's impossible never to be angry. But how one handles it is the thing. Jesus is talking about the kind of anger and hatred that gets out of control--maybe not actually leading to murder itself, but is serious enough to wish someone dead. When you do that, it is not

merely you have violated the spirit of the law against murder, you have also lessened yourself, your own humanity, in a serious way.

Insightfully, Frederick Buechner writes: *“Of all the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back; in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The [carcass left on the table] is you.”*--*Wishful Thinking*, p. 2.

Jesus extends the meaning of the commandment to include belittling someone by calling them a “fool,” here understood not as a flippant use of the term, but the contemptuous, mean-spirited kind of judgment on someone in which you reduce them in your own mind and spirit to a level of worthlessness or inferiority, setting ourselves up as judge and jury and condemn them as though we were God. We “lord over” others when we do that, but not in the way of Jesus. This is not the way to share the gracious rule of Jesus.

What is the alternative? The wise way, the righteous way, the Jesus way—is to climb down from our high horse where we have placed ourselves and reconcile to the person with whom we are angry. We don’t live on high horses. We are meant to live together in harmony and equality and with the concern of all in mind. If we don’t, sooner or later—as the other comments Jesus makes teach--we will be the ones who very well may come to disaster and ruin, ending up in courthouse or the poorhouse (vss.25-26).

What Jesus refers to here--that part about "*leaving your gift at the altar*"--is the very first murder in the Bible. Remember? It is in Genesis 4:3-7. It is a story about the problem of Cain's anger at his younger brother Abel--anger that leads to murder. Cain is bringing his sacrifice to the altar. In his anger at his brother, he wants to dominate him, rise above him, and kill him. God warns about the danger of remaining in anger and tells him he can "*master it and do well*"--which means to go talk with your brother and make peace. So Jesus' word, "*Go, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come offer your gift.*" You see, in Cain and Abel's day, people got crops by making a sacrifice--a gift--to God, and hoped thereby God would have regard for their sacrifice, and the crops would grow. If their crops were not growing well, they said, "*God had no regard for my offering.*" Cain thought his crops were not growing well because God "*had no regard for his offering.*" If Cain had gone to Abel, who proved a successful farmer, Abel would have helped him. Then, by doing so, it could have solved three problems--with his brother, with God, and with his crops. Everyone becomes angry over certain things. Jesus did. But to be angry with the right person, for the right reason, to the right degree, and in the right way, that is not easy, but it is what Jesus calls for here. Anger combined with unwillingness to make peace interferes with our relations with others, and with God--and also, in a sense, life itself. Jesus is instructing that the righteous life that is always concerned about reconciliation and making peace with others. That's kingdom life.

The next verses—vss.27-30—continue a similar way of thinking. It's not merely the outward conformation to the law on adultery and that is sufficient in the Jesus way. There would be many fewer divorces if husbands and wives were really honest with each

other in their struggles—especially those of the wandering eye or heart, and then courageously search out the reasons for them. Too often—especially within the family and within the church—we let shame or fear of disappointment control our decisions. We keep to ourselves too many of our private and troublesome thoughts. Finally, when we can take no more, the real truth about us gets out and acts in ways destructive to our-selves and marriages and to our children. This is why Jesus uses the overstatement of “*pluck out your eyes*” and “*cut off your hands.*” We might say it this way: “*Are you having a serious problem? Get real, get serious, and get professional help.*” This usually isn’t easy. It’s often painful, especially when there are elements of addiction involved. So before disaster happens, bringing worse pain and consequence--make the mature—even difficult—choices. BE HONEST, BE REAL, GET HELP.

Reality is we are created with desires--some good, some not--desires which come naturally. Jesus is not condemning everyone who has a momentary flash of lust in his mind. But he’s dealing with that kind of looking and continuing to look with an aim to wrong or illicit desire. “Looking” in this instance is an action, an ongoing practice, serious behavior like continuing to be angry or contemptuous of someone else. Martin Luther said, “*It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away.*” More colorfully he put it, “*You can’t keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair!*”

So what is the deeper meaning and observance of the 7th commandment? Again, it is not mere external observance. It’s an internal matter. Jesus here diagnoses looking at others with lust as a desire to possess, an intention to dominate, to use for mere

selfish gratification--even if only in the mind--as a violation of the real spirit of the commandment, and certainly the Spirit of Jesus. While addresses himself to the men of his day, it well applies both to men and women. Looking with lust is not the same as appreciating beauty. Human beings can and do appreciate the beauty and grace of one another. Even God, *"looked at everything that he made, and indeed, it was very good,"* (Gen 1:31).

But in Jesus' time, the teachers--rabbis--were increasingly avoiding women and excluding them from public life. Likewise, some cultures have strict requirement about how women must cover themselves, and how they should be in subservience to men, walking behind them so men are not tempted to look at them. Women in such cultures are often condemned for adultery but not the men. What Jesus was doing was correcting such abuses. Jesus placed the responsibility squarely on men for their actions, their practices. Still today men need to step up, take responsibility and change their practices. But what Jesus also doing is calling for a radical new understanding between men and women, where no one is treated as a sex object or slave, superior or inferior.

In both of these instances of interpreting the law, Jesus is setting out the vision and practice of the kingdom-life, and the practical ways his kingdom way is to be lived out in the Christian community. We need to hear this: Jesus teaches that all anger and hostility, lust and covetousness are outside the bounds of God's kingdom. Yet the balance of both passages also recognizes that Christians do get angry and suffer through broken relationships. Jesus thus deals with what to do when it occurs, as well as how to prevent it. Jesus gives us both vision and practice.

Just so, Jesus announces here the good gift of God to the world, a world where

anger/hatred have no place, and where corrosive human actions and relationships cannot endure. He is saying, *“Now, go and get out there in the rough and tumble of the world and live out what is already true of you because of me”*--as salt and light. Similarly in Mark 9:42-47, Jesus says, *“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”* To have *“salt in ourselves”* means to be different from the typical ways of the world. To be at peace happens when men and women treat each other with mutual respect and avoid practices that lead to hatred and disrespect, and unfaithfulness and abuse.

In a world that constantly urges us to turn people into objects to be consumed and exploited, Jesus calls his followers to discover wholeness and righteousness in relationships of equity, mutuality, compassion, mercy and solidarity--in word relationships that manifest the same justice and love that God constantly shows toward each of us. And that means we must not think so highly of ourselves for not breaking the technicalities of moral law, while treating others to be possessed and disposed of, or leave them to situations of brokenness that render them even more vulnerable to sin and abuse.

Pastor Barbara Blaisdell reflects on this passage: *“Each of us stand before Jesus Christ as a sinner redeemed, not by our own goodness but God’s. Daily I fall short of the glory of God has envisioned for me, and sometimes I surprise myself because of God’s grace I rise to the occasion and manage to love, to forgive, to live a better life than I ever imagined I could. Then I stumble and fall again and must rely, once again, on God’s forgiveness. I stand before these teachings the same way...a sinner redeemed by God’s goodness and love, one who falls short, so very short of the grace given to me through Christ, but also one who has been freed from that sin enough to get up and try*

again and again to live up to the vision God has for me and for us all.”-- (Matthew, I, Feasting on the Gospels, p. 102).

So as the song says: *“I keep a close watch on this heart of mine. I keep my eyes wide open all the time; I keep the ends out for the tie that binds... I walk the line.”*

And why? It’s not mere morality. It’s about a new reality. It’s about being Jesus’ people who live with his vision for a kingdom world, who live daily, intentionally, to carry out the kingdom purposes of God--the salvation of the world--who *“have salt in themselves”* and are driven *“to make peace with one another.”* Amen.