

“Some Words Matters”

Matthew 5:31-37

There is a story about Mark Twain, who loved to brag about his hunting and fishing expeditions. He once spent three weeks fishing in the Maine woods, though the fishing season was by then closed. With his catch iced down in the baggage car of the train back to New York, he was relaxing in the lounge car and looked for someone to tell the story of his successful holiday. And he found someone to whom Twain began to boast but who appeared unresponsive, and then positively grim. *“By the way, who are you, sir?”* asked Twain. *“I’m the state game warden,”* was the unwelcome response; *“Who are you?”* Twain nearly swallowed his cigar, and then said hastily, *“Well, to be perfectly truthful, warden, I’m the biggest liar in the whole United States!”*

Last time, we considered the first of the two Six Antitheses that Jesus gives here in the Sermon on the Mount. In each of them, Jesus deepens the meaning of the Law for his followers by citing a specific law and its then current understanding and practice, and setting his own teaching beside it in contrast--hence, antithesis. In the two examples we had last week, Jesus spoke to what were mere outward observances of two laws--those pertaining to murder and adultery--surface observances that Jesus said really missed the meaning of living those commandments. Today, Jesus cites two abuses of two laws that were very common at the time. Both of them have to do with failing to take one’s obligations seriously in both marriage and giving one’s word. So I have called them “words matters.” I am treating them in reverse order.

Jesus cites what is a summary understanding of several laws in the Old Testament when he says, *“You shall not swear falsely, but carry out your vows you have made to the*

Lord,” (vs. 33). Imagine a world with no lawyers!--no notary publics. Every kind of agreement is by word. The issue here is about two people making an agreement and swearing it. Jews had become very wary of actually using the name of God for oaths. But it was custom to swear by something associated with God--be it heaven, earth, Jerusalem, even one’s own head. Over time, this led to an abusive practice of affirming many things with oaths. Needless to say, people often agreed on something with an oath but then reneged and failed to live up to it in spite of the oath they gave. It became so elaborate and prevalent that even the rabbis argued over whether oaths should be used or not. One of several Jewish writings of the time said, “*Do not accustom your mouth to many oaths,*” (Sirach 23:9). In other words, despite oaths, people did not live up to their words.

Jesus essentially cut through all such nonsense with the observation that one’s own word should be sufficient: “*Let your word be, ‘Yes, Yes,’ or ‘No, No,’ anything more than this comes from the evil one,*” (vs. 37)--meaning either the deceit in ourselves or as we all know “*the devil made me do it!*” Truth telling is the matter here. And truth telling is a matter at the core of everything in human relations--be it marriage, business, politics, medicine, religion, and the courts. It was true in the ancient world, it is no less true now. Our words say a great deal about ourselves--sometimes very importantly. There is a saying, “*My word is my bond.*” Sad to say, rarely is that enough anymore. At the heart of the matter is our commitment, our integrity, truthfulness, and trustworthiness.

Now, we need to realize that Jesus here is speaking in a general sense. He’s not laying down an absolute rule about all oaths. He himself was put under oath and

answered accordingly (Mt 26:63-64). Certain things merit oath taking because of the serious-ness of their nature. We are to answer “*the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*” Further, we have to admit there is evil in the world. In an ideal world, oaths would not be necessary. We would always say what we mean, and mean what we say-- as we say. Jesus was certainly speaking to the abuse of oath-taking in his time. But he was also raising the bar of truth-telling. So important was this aspect to the early Christians, it found its way in the book of James word for word: “*Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth, or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No', so that you may not fall under condemnation,*” (5:12)--meaning “judgment” and having to answer for your words, be it in this life or the next.

President Truman said once: “*Always tell the truth. It will please some and astonish the rest.*” For sure, truth telling is not always easy. We all know that. We all have mixed motives. We don't always tell the whole truth. We manipulate the truth for our benefit. We slant the truth in our favor or others' disfavor. Jesus said, “*The truth will set you free*” (John 8:32). But we know that it doesn't always feel like it's freeing. Sometimes the truth hurts. It can cost us severely--a friendship, an opportunity, or other important things. Saying only “Yes” or “No” isn't always easy. But it is very important.

Many a situation comedy episode has been based on the premise of someone trying to be absolutely truthful to everyone in every situation--when it has been their usual practice not to. In the 1997 movie, *Liar, Liar*, Jim Carrey portrays a fast-track lawyer who cannot lie for 24 hours, due to his son's birthday wish after his dad had

broken yet another promise. I remember an *I Love Lucy* episode where she had to be absolutely honest--when she and Ricky were playing cards with the Mertzes; then at her women's club the next day; and finally auditioning for a variety show in which she was supposed to have had some professional experience. In those cases, her telling the absolute truth put her in some hilarious situations. Yet sometimes being really truthful is not funny--or fun.

Jesus is not directing us to be brutal with truth in all situations. To let your answer be "Yes" or "No" does not imply we forego discretion or speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15). There is such a thing as diplomacy, both formal and informal. Handling the truth is often a very serious and careful matter. Raw truth can be a deadly weapon. Yet, Jesus is calling for people to be honest, transparent, and honoring of agreements. Your word should be enough. It should be our bond ordinarily. For with our words, we either honor or dishonor people as well as ourselves. By our words, we show who we are or pretend to be. Our words present ourselves. And more often than not, people--WE--need to be able to depend upon others whose words are a true reflection of the truth and reality. That is part of what it means to be human, grandly human--and in God's image

The second teaching to consider is Jesus' statement here about divorce. Jesus has other things--important things to say about marriage and divorce--and this is not a full explanation about either. What he's speaking to is an abuse by Jewish men in that time. Notice Jesus speaks here to men divorcing their wives, and men--by so doing making a woman an adulteress, just passing her on to the next man. So when Jesus here talks about divorce, he's not talking about divorce! It's the abuse that is in view here.

You see, marriage in the ancient Jewish world--and even still in much of the non-western world today--was very different than we know it. In that world, marriage was not two people entering into a voluntary, loving covenant to share a life of love together. It was much more a business contract. Men arranged with other men--fathers or brothers--to buy women as wives just like they would buy a cow or sack of grain or piece of land. Women were property, property whose primary functions were to their husbands for pleasure, provision of a male heir--and other children--and household duties. Husbands and wives may have come to have affection, respect, and appreciation for one another, but it was not the basis of the marriage, nor were such aspects necessary. Further, if those primary things were not provided as the man desired--or really any other dissatisfaction on his part--there were grounds for divorce. It was simply a matter of his decision, a whim even, on his part. That was the male-chauvinistic, accepted world of the time.

The Jewish law said, and Jesus quotes it from Deuteronomy 24:1-4, "*Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce, if she does not please him.*" All men had to say--before two witnesses--was, "*I divorce you,*" and his wife was cast out of the marriage. Very often, for many such women, they had two options by which to survive--begging or prostitution. So Jesus is--again!--calling out the men, and the Pharisee teachers of the law for being cavalier in their reading of the Law. They say that the legal procedure of divorce is simple. Simple for men!--devastating for the women.

Now the Law itself was full of concern for widows and destitute women. It was the duty of the widower's brother to marry a widow and raise up for him children. If re-marrying was not possible for her, it was the duty of the community to care for her.

Those harvesting fields were to leave a portion of the harvest behind to be gleaned and collected by the widows. It was a law that a portion of the offering collected in the synagogues and temple be given to the widows and the poor. But this often wasn't done, and the women suffered because of it. The men took advantage of the law and the women were caught and left vulnerable. So Jesus is calling the men out for dumping their wives on the community to care for--which often didn't--and abandoning their marriage vows.

Jesus' further words about divorce and adultery have to be understood in this larger context. It is all too easy for Christians to read this teaching as just new law, with Jesus increasing the difficult position of a woman in a destructive and abusive relationship with a bad husband. These verses have been used as word of judgment against those who experience broken relationships. But this is not a word of rebuke to women. It's a word of rebuke to men in positions of power and who use it wrongly. Jesus does not condemn those who experience divorce--though it is not the ideal, of course. Instead here he identifies the consequences of a system that granted power to men and had become more concerned with legal technicalities--"just cause" and "bill of divorcement"--than with the fate of people--especially women--involved. This is Jesus against the status quo--again!

To be sure, Jesus provides us with strong warnings about the importance of pre-serving relationships, but with rebuke only for those who break relationships while insisting that they have met the requirements of the law. Jesus' words shouldn't be interpreted--as they often and for long have been--legalistically. The apostle Paul allowed for divorce not only in the case of adultery but in the case of a spouse not being a

believer (1 Cor 7:15). In that spirit, much of the Christian church--including our own Presbyterian Church--has recognized that tragically marriages come to an end for other valid reasons as well. The point here is Jesus' rebuke of bad practice that put women in positions of abuse and vulnerability. It was unfair. It was unjust. It was wrong. And that's what Jesus addresses in this teaching.

All that said, just as in last Sunday's sermon, the matters here not just mere morality, even better morality. It is about a new Reality--kingdom reality. It is about being part of a new community in Christ Jesus in the midst of the world. Jesus' words call us to live a life of truth where one's words and commitments can be trusted. As members of the beloved community, there should be no distrust one another, and therefore no need to doubt another's word. Living a life of truth signifies faithfulness to Christ. It means we take seriously the fact that *all our words--our lives--take place in the presence of God.*

Jesus' commands are meant to be taken seriously. But they are not new laws, except as the law of love. And they must be considered with the matters of intention of the heart clearly in view, and in light of the kingdom of God Jesus is ushering into the world. This is why Jesus puts such strong emphasis on being faithful and not manipulative and abusive or overly sensitive in the way we look at each other. Jesus' teachings are grace-driven. They presuppose God's mercy, God's love, and God's reign in our daily lives--a reign that is more important than any one of us or our opinions or our feelings in the moment. Until we start taking such teaching seriously, we can expect nothing to change. We may be religious, and go to church-- but we won't be about Jesus and his kingdom.

I close with this. Mark Twain may have been a liar when he needed to be, but he also told the truth--brilliantly sometimes. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, there is this incident--the moral climax of the story. The king and the duke betrayed Jim (the slave) and sold him to a family for \$40. They lock Jim in their shed, where he waits to be returned to his owner for a \$200 reward. Huck leaves Jim and goes back to the raft to figure out what to do next, and there he gets to thinking about the lessons he learned in Sunday School about what happens to people like him who assist runaway slaves:

"People that acts as I'd been acting about [Jim]," he'd been told, "goes to everlasting fire." After all, the Bible is clear: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear,"(Eph 6:5). Huck feels genuine conviction regarding his sin and, fearful of his certain fate in hell unless he changes his course, he decides to write a letter to Jim's owner, Miss Watson, to tell her where Jim can be found. *"I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the [letter] down and set there thinking--thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking.*

And got to thinking over our trip down the river, [Jim's and me]; and I see Jim before me, all the time; in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to see him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always

call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and [there was] the time I saved him by telling some men we had smallpox aboard, and Jim was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that [letter I'd written]...I took it up, and held it my hand. I was trembling because I'd got to decide forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'--and I tore [that letter] up...I shoved the whole thing out of my head...and [I went to] steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up any-thing worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog."

Being a follower of Jesus means our words and people matter. Our words and lives are intricately and intimately intertwined. We are our words and our words are us. Jesus calls his people to be in for the "whole hog"--with and for one another even when it goes against a lot we've been told. "You have heard it said," said Jesus, "But I say unto you..." Amen.