

SERMON TEXT FOR EPIPHANY 6A

PREACHED FEBRUARY 12, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: Deuteronomy 30.15-20, Matthew 5.21-37, Psalm 119.1-8, 1 Cor 3.1-9

If you recall any of your learning of the Ten Commandments, you might remember that the first **three** commandments concern our relationship with **God**, and the other **seven** concern our relationships with **others**. This is an important point because it plays directly into both our Old Testament and our gospel lessons today.

In our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy, we find that the Israelites have finally - after 40 years - reached the Promised Land. They are just about to enter. But before they do, God **cautions** them about not "blowing" it. God wants them to make the **right choices**. God wants them to **live peaceably** with one another. God wants them to **maintain a right relationship** with their creator.

So God reminds them, *"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."*

Seems **straightforward** enough: make the right choices, follow God's commandments, and good things will come to you. **If you don't, then life will be short**. And as almost a **plea** to do so, God says, *"Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."* God desperately wants them to maintain their relationship with him.

This text is so **positive** and **life-affirming** that it comes at sharp **contrast** to our **gospel** lesson, which seems like anything **but** good news. In this continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus starts to warn his disciples in a similar way that God warned the Israelites at the precipice of entering the Promised Land. They all would have been familiar with the Ten Commandments and what is expected of them. But here Jesus admonishes them that a

**minimum** keeping of the law simply is not enough. Their standards need to be **higher** than that; higher, even, than the strict law-keeping of the scribes and Pharisees.

In the commandments noted here, Jesus doesn't just heighten the force of the law, he **broadens** it:

- It's not enough just to refrain from **murder**. We should also treat each other with respect, and that means not speaking hateful words or flying off the handle in anger.
- It is not enough to avoid physically committing **adultery**. We should also not **objectify** other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.
- It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding **divorce**. We should not treat people as **disposable** and should make sure that the most **vulnerable** ones in our society (often women and children) are provided for.
- It is not enough to keep ourselves from **swearing falsely** or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in **all** of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all. And we should always speak well of others, or as our mothers used to say, "If you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything at all."

As we read through these laws and listen to Jesus' words, we may become increasingly aware that we **fail miserably** to meet Jesus' standards. He has set the bar **impossibly high**, and we could respond in several ways.

- We could lapse into **despair** and just say, "That's crazy! Nobody can live up to those impossible standards. I'm not even going to try."
- Another approach would be to say, "Well, I'll try." And we do try, but keep getting sucked into our baser selves, our sinful selves, and soon forget about even trying.
- A third approach would be to allow ourselves to **acknowledge** our sinfulness, to ask forgiveness, and to trust in God's abiding love and grace. Indeed, our only hope is the grace of God.

I can assure you of one thing. Jesus wasn't trying to take all the **joy** out of being human. He was trying to do the exact **opposite**. The things he talks about in this lesson – anger, adultery, swearing falsely, divorce – these are things that **damage** rather than **enhance** our quality of life and our relationships with others.

Then Jesus goes a step further and focuses on the long-term effects of our sinfulness. It's not just about sinning and then asking God to forgive us. It's about that phrase in the Lord's Prayer that may stick in our throats from time to time: "**Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.**"

Jesus reminds the disciples that it does not matter whether we are right or wrong – whether we are the **accused** or the **accuser**. In either case, Jesus says, **we** are to take the initiative. Jesus drops the responsibility squarely in our laps. We are not to **blame** our brother or sister. We are not to wait for **him/her** to initiate the reconciliation. We are not to **require** him/her to apologize. We are to **initiate** the reconciliation even if we feel that we have been wronged – even if we have other urgent matters to attend to – even if we are standing at God's altar with a sheep at our side. If we are to achieve harmony with God, we need first to achieve harmony with our brothers and sisters. And Jesus **makes us responsible** for taking the first step to make that happen.

Jesus wants his disciples - all of us - to be people of integrity, people who are faithful to their promises, people who have no need to swear that they are telling the truth because they **are** truth-tellers. They should be people who **honor** their commitments in marriage and who **respect** the commitments of others. The women in their midst are not people to be used and abandoned at will, but to be treated as equals in God's kingdom.

Once again, it comes down to free will - to our choices and attitudes and whether or not our lives are being lived out of love for God. If we do not love others enough to apologize and choose reconciliation when we have wronged or been wronged, then we do not love God as much as we think we do.

So my friends, what kind of community do we want to inhabit? One where "an eye for an eye" just makes everyone blind, or one in which people actually care for one another?