

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Has it ever occurred to you that what the scriptures say and what they actually mean may be very different from our first interpretations? That's a universal problem. That's why we do Bible study...and that's why we study together...in groups...because it is just too complex for us to figure out all alone. We always need to take it a step farther. God communicates with us in many different ways: through the Holy Scriptures, through the prophets, through prayer, through the Holy Spirit, through each other and most importantly through Jesus. God is communicating with us all the time and in multiple ways. How many of us think we get it right the first time? Probably none of us!

We are in the season of Epiphany...the season when we have Jesus' identity revealed to us in a variety of different ways. It's also a time when Jesus tells us about the nature of God and the intentions of God. In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus has just finished his sermon on the mount...also known as the beatitudes. He tells all who are listening who God blesses and why. On the surface of things, it seems a bit confusing. How could those who mourn be blessed? How could those who are poor in spirit be blessed? How could those who hunger and thirst for righteousness be blessed? These are not the qualities and experiences that we see as blessings. So what is Jesus trying to tell us?

Jesus begins by explaining to his disciples...and to us...what God was trying to tell us in the law given to the Israelites and through the prophets sent to speak God's words. It's more complicated than it seems. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and told him and the children of Israel that if they obeyed these commandments, decrees and ordinances, they would live and they would become numerous. That's clear, right? Obey the law and listen to the prophets and all will be well. It sounds pretty straightforward and simple, right? But it isn't so straightforward and simple, so Jesus explains it to us.

Jesus begins talking about the law and he begins by saying, "You have heard it said" ...and he quotes the law..."but I say to you" ...and then he explains to us what God's intention was behind the law. Jesus has come to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it or change it, but to go one step farther and explain it. The Ten Commandments is not a checklist of behavior. We've probably kept most of them. But that's only the beginning. That's just a first step...the basic minimum.

Jesus explains that the laws given to the Israelites is not the finish line, but the starting point for obeying God and for preparing ourselves to enter into the kingdom of heaven. These commandments are about our behavior...which is important. But what Jesus has to say to us is about our hearts...our intentions...our inner life and our thoughts, not just our behavior. Jesus is telling us how to participate in the building of the kingdom...and it's not easy. But it paves the way for abundant life and for eternal life. Jesus' teachings in today's gospel are about the repair of broken relationships...the ones we have with others and the ones we have with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit...all of which constitute community. All of this happens in community.

Jesus gives us four examples of broken relationships between and among people. One involves how we handle anger and the effect our anger has on others; one is about adultery and how lusting after another plays into that; one is about divorce and the circumstances under which that occurs and the last is about swearing an oath as a testament to truthfulness.

Jesus explains that it's not enough simply not to murder someone. Most of us can avoid that. It's what we say about someone we don't like that maligns them or casts a shadow on their character or diminishes them in any way or insults them. That's the same as a social murder. We can ruin a person's reputation. We are 'killing them' socially and tainting their relationships with other people. Jesus says that it's just as important to keep control of our anger as it is not to murder anyone. It's not that we are never supposed to get angry. Jesus himself got angry when he saw how the money changers were desecrating the Temple. It's not anger itself that is bad. It's what we do with our anger and how our anger impacts us and how it impacts others that's really important. If we are angry with someone or we know that they are angry with us, it's our responsibility to do what we can to reconcile with that person...to repair the relationship as best we can. Unmitigated and chronic anger is bad for both our souls and our bodies. Even the witnessing of someone else's angry explosion can damage us and there's a lot of that going on in the public square recently.

All of Jesus' examples in the gospel this morning are about broken relationships and how to deal with them. We know that when Jesus refers to 'righteousness' he's not talking about people who observe every letter of every law all the time. That's not righteousness; that's piety. When Jesus talks about righteousness, he's talking about 'right relationships.' Righteousness is about right relationship with God and right relationship with each other. It's not about perfection. We are going to make mistakes. We are going to need forgiveness and we are going to need to be able to forgive others. Truly keeping the commandments God gave us is not just about our behavior. Jesus tells us that our behavior is important, but our hearts and our

intentions are even more important. Our pure hearts are about keeping the commandments God gave us as deeply as God intended.

When Jesus talks about lust and adultery he uses hyperbole. He talks about tearing out your eye if it offends you or cutting off your hand if it causes you to sin so that your whole body isn't thrown into hell. That's not to be taken literally. Jesus is not suggesting that people maim themselves. He's pointing out how powerful lust can be in the eventual commission of adultery. Thoughts and fantasies lead to action. Stop them. None of us can help the thoughts that pop into our heads from time to time, but we do have control over what we meditate on and obsess about. That's where we have some control. Jesus is telling us to stop it right there...when it is just thoughts and fantasies that are the dress rehearsal for action.

And Jesus has some difficult words to say about divorce. He's against it, but then Jesus is against any broken relationship. And consider the context of the society in which Jesus is speaking. Women were property and nothing more. They could be divorced by their husbands for the most trivial of transgressions...like burning the bread. But women were not able to initiate divorce. That was a privilege reserved for men. Any woman whose husband divorced her was subject to speculation about adultery, which certainly ruined her socially; she was publicly shamed; and she was rendered economically destitute. Jesus told the men not to do that to their wives. Jesus is about reconciliation, but sometimes...as we all know...reconciliation is not possible. Marriage is about mutual support...just as the realm of the kingdom of God is about mutual support, but some marriages don't work out that way. Some marriages are simply realm resistant. It seems more in line with Jesus' teachings to allow people to live into other relationships that are mutually supportive and do reflect the realm that he is teaching us about.

The last words Jesus has to say are about swearing an oath. Since Christians and disciples of Jesus are supposed to be truth tellers, there is no need to elaborate on that by taking an oath, unless, of course, one is in court. If we are living as Jesus is asking us to live, we are telling the truth under all circumstances and taking responsibility for our own transgressions or mistakes. It's enough, Jesus says, for your "yes" to mean "yes" and for your "no" to mean "no" without there being any swearing involved.

Matthew does not discard the teachings from the Old Testament...from the Torah. Instead, he shows how the deep intention of these commandments becomes operative in the realm that is the kingdom of God. These commandments are not just about changes in behavior that is kinder and more considerate of others, but changes in the heart that restore relationships with others. Jesus is telling us that this is how people in the kingdom both feel and behave which means when we change our hearts as well as our behavior we can begin to live into the

kingdom in this life. We all know that each of us live in our own heads. How lovely it is for God to explain to us through Jesus how to arrange our heads so that we are at peace with ourselves and with others. Don't you remember how often Jesus called out the Pharisees...the keepers of the law...who were so strict about the letter of the law and so ready to point out when Jesus did not keep the law as written? Jesus charged them with hardness of heart. And Jesus is telling his disciples and us not to let our hearts be hard, but to let them be open and pliable and ready to both give and receive.

When our hearts are hard, it doesn't matter to God that we have kept the letter of the law. It doesn't matter to God if we have done all the liturgy exactly as written with no errors. What matters to God is that we come to His table to receive His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, with open hearts...ready to receive God's forgiveness and ready to forgive and be forgiven by our brothers and sisters and to be reconciled to them.

Jesus tells us, "You have heard it said....." and he repeats the law, but what is most important is that we are willing to dig deeper and go farther to change not just our behavior, but our hearts also so that we can be reconciled not only to God, but with all our brothers and sisters as well.

The kingdom of God awaits us in this life as well as in the next. Eternal life begins now. The kingdom of God is available now. All we need to do is to soften our hearts and give them up to God. And by God's grace and with God's help we can each accomplish that.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.