

Pastor Mollie's Sermon

February 16, 2020

Matthew 5:21-37

Treat others the way you want to be treated

The phrase "shut up" was not allowed

Home by curfew

Put dishes in the dishwasher, not just in the sink

Make your bed every morning.

These were just a few of the rules I grew up with.

And when rules were broken, there were always consequences.

When we followed the rules, we were allowed certain privileges

Although most of the rules in our family were there because we were family and it taught us that this is family and we do it together.

(I didn't realize this till later in life...)

Some of these rules still apply in our current house today.

This got me thinking about the rules and laws all over...

School rules

City laws

State laws

And of course hearing some of the rules in which Jesus sets for us as Christians to abide by in our reading for today.

But then I thought about how rules and laws apply... It made me think of it as transactional Christianity.

And by that I mean, a version of Christianity in which I try to earn God's love, by being A Very, Very, Very Good Girl.

A version in which God and I negotiate like traders: piety for protection.

Good deeds for comfort. Or maybe the longer the prayers..the longer life I get.

I know in my head that transactional Christianity isn't true.

I understand intellectually that God is not a rule-obsessed tyrant, waiting to zap me if I make a mistake.

But most of us have a God-related misconception or two lurking in our hearts, and even if we try to get rid of them, they cling.

So reading this week's Gospel I needed to approach it with caution,

because Jesus's words seem — at first glance — to support a *very* transactional version of God:

"If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

"If your right eye causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

If you don't reconcile quickly with your accusers, "you will be thrown into prison until you've paid the last penny."

"Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Whoa!

What are we supposed to do with such dire warnings?

Where is the unconditional love we'd much rather hear about?

This portion of Jesus' sermon on the Mount sounds like it's full of threats, issued by a perfectionistic God.

There has got to be a loophole somewhere?

I wonder if the problem is in part a cultural one.

As a 21st century Christian living in America,

I am inclined to read Jesus's sermon — or rather, I am inclined to read *all* of Scripture — through an individualistic lens.

Whenever I see "you" in the text, I think: "Me. Me, Mollie.

This is a warning to and for *me*."

But that is not an accurate reading.

Jesus isn't admonishing individuals in his Sermon on the Mount;
he is calling forth a new community.

A beloved community.

If we read Jesus's words about murder, anger, reconciliation, adultery, lust, divorce, and oath-making in this more communal context —

I think the version that emerges is of a God who cares profoundly about human dignity.

A God who takes our relationships with each other very seriously, and wants us to treat each other — with the deepest respect, integrity, and love.

Take, for instance, Jesus's teaching on murder.

You have heard that murder is wrong, he tells his listeners.

"But I say to you" that coexisting without literally killing each other is not enough to sustain a beloved community.

It's just the beginning.

Agreeing not to commit homicide is essential, yes,

but what about all the other ways we human beings "kill" our relationships through resentment, rage, unforgiveness, and spite?

Don't we often treat others as if they are Unworthy of love?

Don't we inflict self-esteem crushing violence on each other through our words? Our silences?

Our refusal to extend and receive forgiveness?

What good is it if we, God's children, technically spare each other's lives, and yet commit unspeakable acts of murder through a refusal to love?

Or consider Jesus's teaching on adultery.

You have heard that you shall not commit adultery, he says.

But I say to you that refraining from sleeping with each other's spouses is just the barest foundation of Christ-centered community.

What about honoring human dignity by refusing *in any way* to cheapen or objectify other people?

What about helping each other to succeed in our marriages and other relational commitments, instead of making those vows even harder to fulfill?

Or consider Jesus's instruction not to swear by anything on earth or in heaven, but to simply let our yes be yes, and our no, no.

Imagine, Jesus is suggesting, a community in which the default assumption is that people tell each other the truth.

People keep their promises.

People don't deceive one another.

In such a community, no one needs to say, "I swear!" in order to earn trust.

In God's beloved community, no one uses language to connive or manipulate others. But respect and honor others.

Finally, consider Jesus's words about divorce, which I know can strike us as particularly jarring.

Remember that in Jesus's day, women whose husbands divorced them were often left to starve in the streets.

They had no financial recourse, they would not be welcomed back into their childhood homes, and the social stigma attached to divorce was severe.

What if Jesus is saying, "It's not enough to follow the letter of the law, hand your wife a certificate of divorce, and send her packing —

as if you have no further obligation to a fellow human being.

What about her vulnerability? Her shame? Her future?

In other words, in the beloved community Jesus is shaping, we have a responsibility to uphold each other's dignity as brothers and sisters in Christ —

even when our relationships as spouses or partners come to an end.

That deeper responsibility cannot be signed away with a piece of paper.

It endures no matter what.

With an understanding of seeing these “rules” communally...

the more I see in it — the care and attentiveness of God.

God *wants* us to treat each other well.

God cares a lot about our dignity.

God doesn’t want us to settle for bare minimums in the communities we create;

God wants us to relate in ways that reflect the fullness of divine love, mercy, grace, and generosity.

Jesus isn’t condemning us; he’s reminding us of truths we intuitively know.

The way of love is *hard*.

It’s costly. It hurts.

Commentator Deb Thomas shares in her writing on this text:

Jesus says in every way he can think to articulate it.

You matter.

How you live with each other matters.

What you say and do, what you focus on, what you prioritize as my disciples — *these things matter!*

Your choices have consequences, so please take your communal lives seriously.

Please don’t make faith harder for yourselves and for others by settling for bare minimums.

Reconcile with each other. Honor each other.

Speak truthfully to each other.

Protect each other.

Do these things — not to *earn* God’s blessings, but because you are already so richly blessed.

But let me be the first to admit it: my transactional version of God is sometimes easier to live with than this one.

How much more convenient and comfortable my life would be if I could compartmentalize it!

If I could keep my religion private and hidden in its little corner, and forget that there is a seamless awareness between how I treat others, and how I relate to God.

Christianity is not a rulebook for my private morality; it is a deeply incarnational, relational way of life that affects every single human encounter I engage in.

But again: the will of God is not to shame and overwhelm us.

God is *not* invested in our self-loathing.

Our lives with God are personal but never private...

So Imagine what that communal and relational community could look like!

“But I say to you,” Jesus says, again and again and again.

You are blessed. You are salt and light...

You are loved right here, right now.

There is nothing left for you to earn, but there is *everything* left for you to share.

Amen