

Matthew 5:21-37

Are any of you as bothered by this gospel reading as I am? I tell you, I did not want to preach on this text because in it Jesus lets me know just what a sinner I am! It's hard to face that fact. But sometimes we have to face the facts straight on.

Brene Brown, one of my favorite authors, in her book "The Gifts of Imperfection" discusses shame and how it affects our wellbeing. She says that if shame is not discussed and shared it will never go away because "shame loves secrecy". And living with shame keeps us separated from those around us, which is very unhealthy because we are created to live in community. When we don't face who we are we don't fit in with our own self; fitting in, being accepted by our own self, is necessary before we allow ourselves to fit in with others. According to Brown when we don't approve of who we are, we must constantly perform, perfect, please and prove. She says that to belong we need to be who we are. "We can only belong when we offer our most authentic selves and when we're embraced for who we are."

So, I am a sinner in need of God's grace. And I am truly sorry to say, we all are. Romans 3:23 lets us know that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The passage from Romans 3:21-26 lets us know that because of Jesus we are justified, we are made right, through the free gift of grace through the acts of Jesus the Christ.

In the entire passage from today's gospel reading Jesus is speaking in hyperbole, an intentional exaggeration in order to shock us into listening to what he is saying because of its importance. Why would he tell a person to tear out their eye, or cut off their hand if they cause a person to sin? Why would he say something like that? Because he wants us to remember how important it is not to break the commandments. Jesus did not come to replace the law, he came to bring it back into focus. Why? Because he wants us to spend our time with God. When a person doesn't yearn to be with God, then Jesus' death means nothing to that person. We know the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus talks about divorce because in that day it was nothing for a man to divorce his wife. If she was a bad cook, he could lawfully divorce her. If he found a woman who was prettier than she, then he could divorce her. There was such a relaxation of the law that any trivial matter could be a reason for divorce. Yet, according to Jewish custom, the man was not sinning if he remarried a woman who had never been married before; only the woman was committing a sin if she remarried. One of the commentaries I read said Jesus was bringing out the unfairness of the law, perhaps even inferring that if the true reason behind a divorce was to be with another spouse then they are committing adultery. However, if the reasons are due to betrayal or abuse and later one finds another person to marry then it is not adultery. Either way, Jesus isn't in favor of divorce, yet God's heart is to protect the vulnerable.

Today's gospel reading ends with Jesus telling us to take no oaths but for our yes to be yes and our no to be no. Commentators have said what Jesus means is that we are to speak the truth on all occasions. We are to be sure we can substantiate our position, and we aren't to give our word lightly, but be truly sincere in our promises. If we are making a deal, we had better be in a position where we can carry that deal out, we had better have the authority to follow through.

The reason Jesus is taking the time to explain all of this is because he wants us to stay in a right relationship with God. When we stay in a right relationship with God we not only are looking forward to a heavenly future, but we are improving the conditions of life on earth.

This takes us back to the part of the passage where Jesus discusses reconciliation and also advises that a matter be settled before going to court. Jesus wants us to also be in good relationships with others, resolve our differences and repair our broken relationships. When you have done something wrong, admit it. When you make a mistake, admit it. Be honest with yourself, and honest with others. People can relate to making mistakes and appreciate honesty.

In the reading from Deuteronomy this morning we hear Moses telling the people to make the right choices. They are just about to enter the promised land, and Moses is telling them that their choices matter. There will be consequences should they choose to disobey God. Choosing to serve other gods will bring them death. Our other gods in today's world will also bring death. We choose to idolize material possessions and wealth, finding no permanent happiness in them.

I used to do a children's sermon to demonstrate this. I'd take a piece of paper and fold it as I talked about a man who thought his possessions could bring him happiness. First he thought if he had a house he'd be really happy, so he bought himself a house. For a while he was very happy. But in a short time the newness wore off and he started looking for something more. He decided a boat would be just the thing. If he had a boat he could go out on the lake and get away from everything, take his friends and have a good time. But, before too long that wasn't the fun it once was, and he decided a boat really wasn't making him happy. So, he thought, an airplane will make me happy. He bought the plane and soared through the sky and for a while he was happy. But again, it grew old, and he wasn't happy with that either. It seemed as though his world was falling apart because he couldn't find anything that truly made him happy. Then a friend told him about Jesus, how Jesus had come to bring us life, and that the Bible is an instruction guide for our life. The man tried it out, and soon believed. In Christ he found true happiness that never grew old. In Christ he found life.

Jesus wants us to follow what he has laid out before us in the gospels, to take seriously our relationship with God and with others and even with our self. The results will be heavenly. All glory be to God.