

It's about the relationship

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Epiphany 6A: Deuteronomy 10.12-22, Psalm 119.1-8, 1 Corinthians 3.1-9, Matthew 5.21-37

This then is the third of my reflections on the Sermon on the Mount. It has been very good to dig down deep into this collection of sayings and reflect on what they teach. They also reveal something important about the teacher. In preparing this sermon I came across this quote about Jesus by M. Scott Peck, the psychiatrist who wrote *The Road Less Traveled*. Scott Peck said: "*Jesus was lonely and sorrowful and scared - an unbelievably real person*". This is an important thought to keep in mind as we consider his teachings. The man who said and taught the ideas in the Sermon on the Mount was a real person, a person who understood grief and sadness. He understood what it meant to be sick, rejected, abandoned. He understood failure and doubt. He knew and understood the complexities of human relationships and in the midst of his experience he pointed to a new way. I think it is through the lens of his humanness that we can begin to understand his teachings in this next set of verses.

The section we read this morning and will continue with next week is often called the great antitheses because of the way each teaching in this part is introduced. Six times we find this pattern. "You have heard it said....but I say to you". Each of the teachings consists of statement of the law, another statement that adds to it and expounds on what it means and then the application of the teaching to a particular circumstance. It is biblical exegesis, interpretation and ethical application all in one. If that is making your head spin then the topics that are addressed in this section are ones to make even the most jaded reader sit back and take a breath – murder, anger, adultery, lust, divorce, oaths, retaliation and loving your enemies. Today we get to look at the first six. Next week it will be the last two.

Not only are the topics of great seriousness, the language Jesus uses is extreme. If your eye causes you sin he suggests you pluck it out. If your right hand causes you to sin then cut it off and throw it away. I notice biblical literalists are very slow to put these verses into practise! As one commentator put it "even if only a small portion of Jesus' followers today followed through with the plain-sense meaning of this teaching, we'd run into mangled faces and hacked off limbs every time we went to the grocery store, the movies, or work. When we went to church we'd encounter people resembling the cast of a horror movie".

The extreme language used here is again an example of hyperbole. Jesus is doing this to make a point. I'd like to suggest that his main point is the primary importance of human relationships. As I said at the start Jesus was an unbelievably real person who cared and loved deeply. He was no guru on a mountaintop or a scholar in an ivory castle. He knew people, he knew their pain and joy and he knew that people took precedence over the letter of the law every time. He also knew that relationships between people needed to be whole and healed. So when Jesus applies the law he is putting another commandment first – the commandment to love. As Douglas Hare puts it, "what is presented in this passage is not a new law but a call to a new way of life".

Let's take each of the teachings in front of us look at then through this lens:

The first one is about murder and anger. Jesus cites the commandment 'you shall not murder' but then adds that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgement and if you insult them then the consequences are grim. Just **not** killing someone is not enough.

What Jesus' teaching highlights is the danger of the anger that gives rise to physical violence and murder and that insulting a fellow human being is not to be lightly regarded. You would all know that these sentiments poison relationships. They breed distrust and tension. Resentment, bitterness, unresolved anger are like cancers that eat away at the soul. There is very little of the Kingdom coming when we are in this state.

I would like to point out that anger is not wrong. Sometimes feeling angry is an entirely appropriate and normal response. What we need to be careful about is what it may compel us to do and that there are potentially serious consequences if we allow it to drive our actions. One of the most sensible things we can do in life is find a safe way to feel and acknowledge our anger and once we have felt it then to be reconciled to the person we have had the problem with. What Jesus points out is that for our relationships to be healthy we must deal with what we carry in our hearts – our resentment, our anger, our hurt. We may think we have a lid on our true feelings but the people around us can tell and it does make a difference. It makes a difference too in our relationship with God. It seems obvious but there is something hypocritical about praying to God around his communion table and being estranged from our sisters and brothers in Christ. It is after all a communion table, where we are united in the Body of Christ. Jesus tells his followers - be reconciled with others and then offer your thanks to God.

The second set of sayings is about lust and adultery. There has actually been at least one person who did take the warnings of Jesus in this section literally. The patristic theologian Origen castrated himself so that he could control those temptations of lust and adultery. Well I guess he did not have the temptations at all. Origen's solution is of course vastly unappealing and most importantly not necessary. What Jesus is saying is that the inappropriate acting out of sexual impulses is a serious problem – for the person and for those around them. If you cannot get your impulses under control then you and the people around you will suffer greatly. Don't take this matter lightly.

One of the most distressing things about our modern culture is the way we objectify the human body and our fellow human beings. The bikini clad model is not a person with complex layers of feelings, hopes, history and need but a thing that we use for our gratification on some level – she has the body we want, the clothes we desire, the life we long for. The muscle bound man in the tuxedo on the screen is not a person with insecurities and yearning, intelligence and passion but an object that we hang our projections and expectations upon. And what is really alarming about this is the way we all think this is somehow normal or OK. The explosion in the pornography business around the world seems to me to be one consequence of people normalising this way of looking at another human being. There are so many problems with this industry but one of the greatest dangers of this type of 'entertainment' is the way it objectifies both men and women and fills peoples heads with unrealistic expectations about the body, sex and relationships.

Of course none of this was on Jesus mind as he said his warnings about lust and adultery. Heaven knows what he would say now. But what was probably on his mind was the way women were seen and treated. The commandment he is referring to was the one that stated "thou shall not commit adultery". The commandment, as it was originally understood, referred to a special kind of theft – the adulterer was guilty of depriving a married man of his exclusive rights to his wife and rendering her 'damaged goods'. Women were seen as objects, things, something to be owned, with no identity apart from her owner. In our age, in some places, this is still how women are seen.

What Jesus did was to see and treat women not as seductresses to be avoided or property to be used but as sisters to be welcomed into full fellowship in the kingdom, persons in the eyes of God and man. His startling challenge to his male listeners was that they see and relate to women differently. It is also a challenge to women that they see and relate to men in a whole and healthy way. It seems to have been a long haul to get his vision enshrined in church doctrine and law. But at the heart of these teachings is the primacy of relationship. How men and women see and treat each other. How they relate and how that relating affects the whole of society. The teaching that follows on divorce is connected to this issue.

There were two schools of thought in Jesus' day concerning divorce, one liberal and one conservative. Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was only permissible on the grounds of some sexual impropriety. His was the stricter view. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, had a more liberal view and taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason. If she burned his breakfast, put too much salt on his food, showed disrespect to him, spoke disrespectfully of her husband's parents in his presence, spoke to a man on the street, or even let her hair down in public, he could divorce her. The view of Rabbi Hillel was the view that was popular in Jesus' day and sure enough divorce was common in Palestine. In this respect the setting was not unlike our own. Perhaps the most significant difference between their customs and ours lay in the different status of men and women. A man could divorce a woman on a whim, but a woman could not divorce a man for any reason.

Now, I can with some experience talk about divorce – because I have been married once before and failed at it abysmally. My husband divorced me, and being a catholic at the time, I could have tried to have the marriage annulled. Although I was not a very good wife, in fact I made a right botch of it, I didn't and I still don't believe my first marriage was a non-marriage so annulment was never an option. However, Jesus takes us beyond the letter of the law. Jesus teaching is not more legalism, although over the centuries we have tried to use it as a basis of law. His teaching rather establishes a principle that recognizes that God's will for humanity is covenantal relationship. It also recognizes what happens when it is not achieved. A divorce may revoke a legal contract but one cannot un-live the vital ties created by life together in marriage, however painful they may be – and for those of us and our children who have been through the difficulties of divorce, we know just how painful that is. I would suggest that always underlying these teachings of Jesus is the command about love, the fulfillment of God's purposes.

It is a love that supersedes all legalism and redeems all pain and suffering. This type of love is the foundation and bedrock for all our relationships – those that are healed and whole and those in the process of being transformed, those that are broken and in the process of being repaired.

And the final teaching in this section is about oaths. This may seem incongruent after all this emphasis on human relationships and the appropriate expression of feelings yet it also has as its focus relationships. Jesus seems to be critiquing the way people would take an oath and swear by God they were going to carry out some promise but not follow through. An oath is more than a vow or a promise. A vow, is a voluntary promise made to God, as in a marriage or monastic vow. A promise, is an engagement to do or keep from doing some thing. An oath is an assertion in the presence of God, who it is believed will punish the person for falsehood. The colloquial version of an oath is - If I don't tell the truth, if I don't do what I say I will do, the divine power will punish me. Cross my heart and hope to die!

With all these different levels of promise it seems that truth telling and commitment could be flexible. Instead Jesus says, don't take an oath at all – just do what you will or will not do. Let your word be 'yes' or 'no'. There are no levels of truth and commitment. There are no core and non-core promises. There are no white lies and crystal clear truth. The critical thing was that men and women be absolutely truthful in their words and faithful in their commitments in every circumstance. Such truthfulness and commitment is the way to build relationships that are solid and have integrity. It is the only fruitful way to live in God's Kingdom.

These teachings of Jesus are astonishing. He said back at verse 17 that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. In these teachings he presents a radical way to interpret each of the First Testament commands. Their fulfilment comes when we give primacy to loving relationships, when we put the person first, when we are true to our commitments. Aside from the relationship with our loving creator, our human relationships give us the most joy and security and the most opportunities for personal growth and transformation. They can also bring us the most pain. Jesus knew that in the most real and complete way. He connects the dots for his listeners, from outward acts to our inner orientation and thereby sets up the solid foundations for relationships that are healed and whole. How blessed are we that he opens our eyes to this new way of life. As we gather around his table let us give thanks for his way. May we be drawn ever closer to him so we may love as deeply and as fully as he. Amen.