

In Right Relationship
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Introduction to the Reading

Let me say before I start the reading, this is a tough lectionary passage. I joked with our Bible Study that I've decided to give up the Lectionary for Lent. But here we are, in the year of Matthew, and you may recall that we're on the third Sunday in the Sermon on the Mount. Today we're moving from affirmation to challenge - from Jesus' affirmation that this new community he's establishing is filled with blessings, filled with people of salt and light - to his challenges for them to live righteously. We start with Jesus reinforcing his Jewish identity: he is not here to set aside Jewish law or tradition, but to draw this community deeper into it. Followers of Jesus founded a distinct religion much later - when we hear these words it's important to recall Jesus was Jewish and did not reject the tradition

Then, we move on to three of Jesus' most challenging teachings. The New Interpreters Bible labels them this way:

Love shows no hostility
Love is not predatory
Love in Marriage

We finish with swearing.

And perhaps you'll be swearing by the end of this complicated passage but I ask you to stick with me as we explore its meaning.

Listen for God's word to you.

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 5:17-37

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you,

unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

21 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out 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. ³⁰And if your right hand 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 go into hell.

31 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 'Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

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Prayer

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It would be quicker to make a set of rules in the form of

Thou Shalt Nots.

Thou Shalt Not commit adultery, for example.

But OWL - the Our Whole Lives Comprehensive Human Sexuality Curriculum of the United Church of Christ chooses instead to frame human relationships in terms of positive principles.¹

“From a biblical perspective, sexuality is intended to express mutuality, love, and justice. In judging whether behavior is ethical or unethical, the norms of mutuality, love, and justice are the central criteria.”

That’s a lot more complicated than a five word Thou Shalt Not statement.

Our Whole Lives dives deep into positive principles like Self-Worth, Responsibility, Justice, Inclusivity, Health and Consent.

OWL, you see, does something similar to what Jesus is doing in our text this morning. It does not drop the rules - rather it goes to the heart of God’s teachings and our tradition. It looks with nuance and subtlety and grace at something that is confusing and complicated.

Our Whole Lives considers human relationships, especially sexual and romantic relationships, from the basic premise that no one should be considered an object, and no one should be treated as less than their partner or the members of their community.

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Could you get to Jesus, I hear some of you asking?

I think OWL’s principles come right from what Jesus says here in the Sermon on the Mount.

And likewise, it would be easy to hear Jesus offering a set of Thou Shalt Nots - quick rules and condemnations - and to walk away saying “*Jesus condemned murder, adultery, and divorce. Also swearing. It’s right there in Matthew Chapter 5.*”

¹ https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/health-and-wholeness-advocacy-ministries/sexuality-and-our-faith/justice_sexuality-education_our-whole-lives/

It's more challenging, though - and more life giving - to dig deeper.

You may have heard that all you need to do is follow the rules, check off the boxes.

But I say to you, righteousness is about right relationship with God and with one another.

I say to you that these teachings are not about our individual holiness, but rather about life in sacred community. Life in the kingdom of God. Life as a people who are salt and light and blessing to the world.

To understand that, we have to go back even further than Jesus - all the way back to Moses.

Several of this morning's teachings refer to the 10 Commandments, as Jesus expands and interprets them.

Now the 10 Commandments came about this way. An oppressed people had been liberated from slavery in Egypt. Moses, called by God, had led them away from Pharaoh, and toward a new kind of community. He went up a mountain to receive God's wisdom for the people. This nation was to live according to God's laws of love and justice and righteousness and mercy, not according to Pharaoh's ways of enslavement, vengeance, retaliation, objectification.

Love and worship God alone. Keep Sabbath. Honor your family. Be peaceful. Honor your marital commitments. Be satisfied with what you have. Be truthful. (These are my positive paraphrases of some of the commandments.)

So began the law that Israel was to live by. We know that many more commandments came. We know, too, that the Torah and Jesus similarly prioritized two ideas: to love God, and to love our neighbors.²

Matthew's Gospel portrays Jesus as the new Moses. "Jesus, having been to the wilderness, he ascends a mountain and delivers a law" points out Amy Jill-Levine.³ Jesus is establishing a new community distinct from Caesar's ways of economic and religious oppression, violence and objectification. To do this, Jesus is calling them - calling us - into the heart of the law.

² Matthew 22: 34-40, and Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18.

³ *Women's Bible Commentary*, Matthew. P. 255.

So, we can't just check a box. This is not a set of negative Thou Shalt Nots - it's a positive construction of a community.

It's more than not killing your neighbor - in the community of the kingdom, you've got to live with them and love them, even when you're mad at them or they're mad at you.

It's more than not committing adultery - in the community of the kingdom, you honor your neighbor and look upon them the way God would look upon them.

It's more than not divorcing - in the community of the kingdom, you treat everyone with dignity and respect and equity - women, men, everyone.

It's more than not swearing - it's relating to everyone with honesty and integrity.

I want to share more about Jesus' reflection on divorce, because it is tender for so many folks. Let me be very clear: there are situations in which the only reasonable outcome is divorce. Those situations range from abuse to sadly "irreconcilable differences." And if you review everything that Jesus says on this subject, you find that Jesus made room for the reality of divorce. And I do not judge folks who have been through divorce.

It's also important to understand some context from Jesus' day, summarized by Matthew Myer-Boulton. "In first century Palestine, marriage and divorce were profoundly patriarchal institutions in which women and children were technically considered the property of men."⁴

Understandings of divorce varied in Roman society, and even among major rabbinical schools.

"But in the main, Jewish law traditionally gave that power to husbands...Women and their children were highly dependent on marriage for their livelihood and wellbeing, and this dependence, combined with their husbands' ability to initiate divorce, put women and children in an acutely vulnerable position."⁵

⁴ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/10/3/one-flesh-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost?rq=divorce>

⁵ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/10/3/one-flesh-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost?rq=divorce>

So Jesus' commitment around divorce was a commitment to the most vulnerable - as it so often was. People are not property. You can't dispose of or dismiss someone.

Myer-Boulton thinks Jesus was trying to say: "God's ideal vision for marriage is that it entails becoming "one flesh," two people who care for each other to such an intimate, life-giving degree that they become one, and they cannot be torn asunder. Don't take that vision lightly."⁶

Mutuality, love and justice are our guide.

When we look at Jesus' teachings, on that hillside so long ago, we witness
Jesus blessing his followers,
Jesus affirming his followers,
Jesus calling his followers to be their best and highest selves,
in a kingdom community built on righteousness, justice and most of all love.

We are called into the same kingdom community.

Now, we are not perfect.

And Jesus knew it. Though this passage sets up a great challenge, Jesus also preached grace, again and again

" **25** When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" **26** But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." (Matthew 19)

We strive, and succeed, and fail, and strive again,⁷ and God's love and mercy are steadfast. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Benediction: (from the Bible paraphrase *The Message*, Matthew 5:48) "You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

⁶ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/10/3/one-flesh-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost?rq=divorce>

⁷ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/2/9/heart-to-heart-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-6>