

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon Jensen
at Calvary Episcopal Church
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
February 16, 2014**

Matthew 5:21-37

You have heard it said, the Kingdom of Heaven is up there. But I say to you, the kingdom of heaven is *in here* and *through* you. Heaven, God's vision for the world, is always lived *out* and lived *in*. It's inculturated. We incarnate it, make it flesh... embody it... in our actions, in our decisions, in our relationships. Deliberate choices and actions can comprise a life a well lived. We learn more about our faith here at church. But we practice the faith out there, in the world. They are mutually reinforcing. We can learn and practice the faith everywhere at all times and places... and bring a little Heaven to Earth. That's what this Gospel is about.

This section is part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. We pick it up about halfway through. If you want to hear the whole story read Chapter 5 of Matthew. The reading takes on greater power by recognizing the fuller context. The Sermon on the Mount starts with the famous Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" and so on.

This was addressed to Jesus's closest followers but all types of people, represented by the crowds, could have heard it. It is important to note that the Gospel is not just for the select insiders who exhibit extreme righteousness. The Good News of Jesus, living in the Kingdom of God, is an invitation for everyone, saint and sinner alike.

The teaching is structured around six paired ideas. There is a statement and then a counter statement. We hear four of the six in today's reading. It's like overhearing only part of a conversation someone is having. Each contains a statement of the Law of Moses. It was something everyone assumed to be true or accepted wisdom. "You have heard it said..." was a device to summarize traditional teaching on a subject.

Following each example of accepted wisdom..."You have heard it said..." Jesus pairs it with a contrasting idea ... "but I say to you." Look at them closely. The pairs are not just a point and counterpoint. What Jesus does... is describe the consequences of actions. It is not so much a judgment but a diagnosis.

“You have heard it said”, the common knowledge, is about obeying the Law... following the rules... doing the minimum. “But I say to you” is about the animating Spirit behind the Law, about living in the Kingdom. The accompanying application of each is a way to enact Heaven come to Earth.

Fundamentally, all of these teachings of Jesus focus on the primary importance of relationships. They are about treating people as human beings, as neighbors *also* created in God’s image, rather than relating to them as strangers or objects. They are even about how we treat ourselves, that we live with integrity knowing we are valued and loved as children of God.

The first example. You have heard it said, you shall not murder. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable for judgment. It is easy to hear that and make the assumption that we are never supposed to be angry. Jesus does *not* say that. Anger is human. Instead of saying don’t be angry, he describes the consequences of harboring it. Anger, Jesus knew, turns to resentment and bitterness over time if it is not released. Anger grows if not addressed--- and it diminishes all of our relationships.

Jesus is saying, you know not to murder, but anger in your heart will kill you and those around you just as surely as any weapon. It is natural to be mad sometimes, but work towards forgiveness and it loses power over you. Sustained anger reduces people to less than they are.

Second, You have heard it said, don’t commit adultery. But I say to you if you look at a woman with lust you have committed adultery in your heart. Better to tear out an eye that causes us to sin. With *my* two *good* eyes I see no blind men here. Either Calvary is full of righteousness or we don’t take everything literally. Without lust, half of the commercials we see would have no power and wouldn’t sell a thing. Note too, thankfully, Jesus does not expect that we will never look at another person lustfully. That’s very human. Most of the disciples were young, unmarried men. It’s *not* a random example he chose. But just saying don’t do it- does not work with children *or* adults to change behavior.

What happens when we look at a person with lust? That’s what Jesus wants us to recognize for ourselves. He or she immediately becomes an object. As an added bonus, the Greek for “lust” and “covet” are the same word. Looked at that way, people and things both become objects of desire to be possessed which, in turn, can end up possessing us. Obviously, Jesus is not saying to start cutting off body parts every time we see a supermodel or a Ferrari. In short, he or she is a person who deserves dignity and respect as one created, like us, in the image of God. For both anger and lust, don’t fight them... let them go. We don’t need someone or something else to make us whole... God already did that.

The third example of divorce is an extension of the teaching on adultery. Divorce was a reality then as now. In that culture, only a man could divorce a woman. Too bad, so sad, for her. Jesus is referencing the Book of Deuteronomy, the accepted wisdom on the subject. The certificate of divorce is what gave her the ability remarry or work to provide for herself. In a very real sense, the wife was property transferred from father to husband with few rights of her own.

There were two schools of thought on the matter. The conservative taught that man could only divorce a woman on grounds of infidelity. The more progressive school taught that a man could divorce his wife for any number of reasons. These offenses ranged from adultery, having a wart, the inability to cook, or, my personal favorite, even if she talked too much. (Preaching Through the Christian Year p115).

Divorce was a reality. They had to deal with the world the way it was rather than how they would have it to be. The issue was not *should* divorce be allowed but what were the grounds for it. In short, Jesus is saying don't treat someone as property but as a person to be respected and loved- both ways. To do anything less diminishes both woman and man.

The fourth example involves making an oath. You have heard it said, do not swear falsely but I say to you do not swear at all. This is not about swearing in the sense of cursing. Thankfully, there is no prohibition against that I am aware of. This example is about making an extra guarantee that you are telling the truth. That's like saying, I swear on a stack of Bibles or on my mother's grave. Don't make a special vow to let others know you are telling the truth. When you make a promise, do all you can to keep it. Live with integrity, be consistently truthful, and that will affect every aspect of your life.

These are not meant to be impossible ideals to which we can never measure up. They are deliberate, practical steps to see Heaven breaking into this world through us. Each situation we encounter is a new opportunity to deepen faith and our relationships. This week, what will you learn about you and the Kingdom? How will you practice your faith everywhere... at all times and in all places?