

Sermon

Now Go and Be Reconciled

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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The Gospel of Matthew brings us the portion of Jesus's sermon where he outlines the laws that have been set forth by God. As I just read, Jesus briefly addresses murder, divorce and adultery, how we treat our brothers and sisters, judgement and swearing falsely. When I read these words, I imagine Jesus bringing forth these reminders, as these laws are nothing new, with great passion and energy.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; 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.”

There is a real risk for us to be righteous as we read through these passages. I have never murdered anybody, so this does not apply to me. Now I have been divorced, but it wasn't me who committed adultery. And have I judged my brothers and sisters, certainly at times of course. Have I felt superior at times, I think so, if I'm being honest. In my mind, Jesus in this passage is speaking to that

part of us. The part that excuses ourselves from truly having to follow the Hebrew laws – God’s laws.

There is temptation in all parts of life to look at laws or regulations as just something you have to tolerate or maybe work around. Some people maybe fudge their taxes a little, some maybe speed at times or do worse – drink and drive in the hopes all will be well. Some laws are frivolous maybe but on some level, I think we understand the importance of them for the good of all. Drunk driving is extremely dangerous and can be lethal. Speeding, same. Paying our fair share of taxes some might argue is our contribution to the things we all need – safe roads, fire and first responders, hospitals, police. If all fudge, they fall short and we all suffer in the end.

So Jesus is emphatically, but briefly addressing certain parts of the law. And the parts he is addressing seem to have to do with how we specifically treat each other and how we live together. He is likely speaking to the leadership of the church – why? Because then and today, these laws can and have been used to oppress the people, but oh that is not God’s intention.

All those years ago, Deuteronomy offered a choice. A choice to live a life in the way God instructs. We have this same choice today. Actually “offered” is too generous – Deuteronomy does not offer a choice so much as require that a particular choice be made: “If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...then you shall live...” The choice and its consequences are clear: Choose covenant, receive life; reject covenant, choose death. We are a society that likes choice though aren’t we? We like to be able to shop around for the best deal, the best option and then carefully decide which way to go. I’ve been shopping for a

couch for 2 months – yet, in my faith, the choice is do this, or else. Follow these laws, or you will suffer. The truth, according to Deuteronomy, is that there will be hell to pay for the choices we make when those choices run counter to God’s covenantal obligations. As a pastor and a human who has lived through these choices, I can concur that when these laws are not followed, great suffering does indeed follow.

So how do we reconcile our thinking of choices being good, to following just one way of thinking, one way of living? When we make a decision, rather than a choice, to walk with God, to follow the teachings of Christ, we become reconciled to God. The truth is that these laws are how God knows we can flourish in the world he has created, with the utmost being placed on our ability to live with and love one another. It is not possible to be truly joyful, truly happy, and truly living God’s will for us, when we are not reconciled with our community, with our family. Now we all have relationships that we are unable to truly reconcile and repair, but that is not the law that all relationships should be successful or fruitful. It is not to stand in judgement which is at times, very difficult. That is why we must continually come back to these teachings.

Are you carrying pain in your heart? God has set forth these teachings for you. The law is not to oppress but to unify us. The laws are not to restrict our choices, but to enable us to have a full life living in peace with one another. And if these laws are used to single out or judge someone, especially within the walls of the church, then we know that it is not from God. God knows we are not going to live this perfectly but listening carefully to Jesus, that is not what he is teaching. Jesus speaks clearly here – to the church leaders...do not use these laws in a way

to be higher, in a way to Lord over others. These laws are not for you to impose...these laws are for you to ensure all people are treated as the Child of God they are.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, used to say to her fellow workers, particularly in difficult and stressful times: “If each of us could just remember that we are all created in the image of God, then we would naturally want to love more.” At the holy altar, standing shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, we remember once again that in God’s realm there are no outsiders. Every gift is accepted, each offering received.

And when we live with this type of love in our hearts, we hear Jesus’ words anew – “Now go and be reconciled.”

Amen