

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

21st Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Matthew 5:21-26

Title: “Who Are You? Create Right Relationships”

The scripture this morning caused me to ask myself: have I experienced broken relationships? No hands please but have you? I expect that if I did ask for a show of hands, we'd all be hoisting one. The relationships in my own life that have been broken have not all been repaired, and while I sometimes wish it could be different, sometimes it just isn't. Brokenness remains and it does have an effect on the soul and on community.

It is so very clear that the Christian faith recognizes that who we are cannot be fulfilled in isolation. We were made for relationship and for passing on the life and love given to us by God. We've all experienced the pain of broken relationships and the joy of restored ones. How does our relationship to others define us?

Once again we hear from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel account. Once again we hear Jesus turning the world's values upside down, and when we take the teachings seriously find ourselves wondering perhaps if we can truly follow in his ways because if the teaching of Jesus is a new set of laws that disciples must fully obey or lose their membership in the “Christian club”, then most of us would have our membership cards revoked. If the “Sermon on the Mount” simply replaces the laws that Moses brought down from the peak of Mt Sinai, then Jesus has made our burden heavier. In fact, he has made it impossible. Yet, if we are serious about following Jesus, then this is serious stuff. Jesus doesn't sound like he's kidding around here. In fact, immediately before the section read this morning Jesus tells his audience:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus pushes the law further than Moses. Moses brought the 10 commandments most of which have to do with external behaviors but Jesus steps it up a notch and moves it to inward thoughts and feelings. “You mean it's not just about how we behave toward others, Jesus? It's about what we think and feel?”

In 2008, A.J. Jacobs, a journalist living in New York, decided he would attempt to live

biblically for one year and then write about the experience. That is, as a Jewish person he would try to observe all the biblical rules. I remember hearing him being interviewed about his experience. He described his attempts to keep not just the 10 Commandments but also to obey the hundreds of less publicized rules: to avoid wearing clothes made of mixed fibers; to play a ten-string harp; and to stone adulterers. He had to get creative with some of them, like stoning an adulterer. He decided that he could fulfill this law by carrying little pebbles in his pockets. Once when he came to a crosswalk, he found himself standing behind someone he knew was an adulterer, so he took a couple of pebbles out of his pocket and tossed them at the back of the man's shoes.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raises the bar when it comes to the Mosaic law. For example, three times in this chapter, Jesus speaks to 3 of the 10 commandments and increases the requirements for fulfilling them:

First, Moses delivered the command: *Thou shalt not kill*. But Jesus raises the bar saying:

(early service) ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,^[a] you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult^[b] a brother or sister,^[c] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell^[d] of fire."

(later service: I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.)

Second, Moses said, *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. Jesus raises the bar: (early service) ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

(later service) ²⁷⁻²⁸ "You know the next commandment pretty well, too: 'Don't go to bed with another's spouse.' But don't think you've preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your *heart* can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your *body*. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.)

Third, the law of Moses says, *You shall not make a false oath*. Again, Jesus raises the bar:

(early service) ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.^[n]

(later service: ³³⁻³⁷ "And don't say anything you don't mean. ... You only make things

worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.)

Could any of us seriously claim we have not violated any of these teachings of Jesus about the way in which we are to live in relationship with others? Not being angry with a brother or sister, are you kidding? Experiencing attractions to someone other than a spouse even though never acting on them? Saying yes to someone or something but really meaning no?

Now do you see why I started by saying that if the teaching of Jesus is a new set of laws that disciples must fully obey or lose their membership in the "Christian club", then most of us would have our membership cards revoked?

If the "Sermon on the Mount" simply replaces the laws that Moses brought down from the peak of Mt Sinai, then he has made our burden heavier. In fact, he has made our task impossible. The weight is too much for us to carry: "...unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

There is another possibility. If Jesus raises the bar so high he knows it will never be fully reached, is he taking us to the very spirit of God's laws? Where nothing is left disguised, no motive hidden, and no thought not weighed, then we begin to give up our excuses, and admit to ourselves that we are less than perfect spirits who cannot possibly save ourselves. We are fallible beings whose only resort is to throw ourselves on the mercy of God our Creator and Redeemer. In our moral and spiritual bankruptcy we hit rock bottom and turn to God to receive forgiveness and renewal. At that low point, not only do we receive the mercy we seek, but a healing process begins. Our less than perfect souls are under the therapy of a new physician whose healing hands can do wonders.

It takes some of us a long time to let go of our self-justifications. Most of us are legalists at heart. We want to prove that we are nice and acceptable people. We sometimes fall into the habit of pointing out the sliver in other people's eyes while ignoring or not seeing the log in our own. And so when we encounter the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' seemingly impossible teachings, that can lead us to play rather delusional games. We can construct our own virtual reality. For example we pick and choose from the Sermon on the Mount. We highlight some of Jesus' words that work for us, words we value and hold dear, while quietly—maybe without even recognizing it--ignoring others.

For example, some make a very big deal about sexuality, marriage and divorce. We take the moral high ground and are loud in our condemnation of those who appear to us to be transgressors. Yet many set aside what Jesus taught us about non-violence, the dangers of the love of money, loving enemies, or the cancer of pride and self-righteousness.

On the other hand, there are those who see themselves as radical believers who make much of the sins of wealth and possessions yet turn a blind eye when there are violations of mores having to do with sex and marriage.

In each case, people can become legalistic, and heatedly condemn others while zealously

protecting their own hard-won self-righteousness.

But that is not the way of Jesus, is it? Selective legalism is not good enough. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus affirms about 25 values. Affirms them without qualification. Is it right-- do you think?-- to judge a fellow Christian for transgressing any one of those values, unless we are prepared to equally judge ourselves on each of the other 24. If we take to mind and heart the whole 25, without any sneaky qualifiers, then one result is certain: All of our supposed superiority to others, every bit of our spiritual and moral arrogance, will crumble into dust.

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

When we find ourselves confessing the log in our own eye, we then know, along with other Christians, that we too have nothing at all to boast about. We too have fallen short of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We have nowhere to turn except to saving grace, to mercy and healing of the Friend of sinners. At that point we are able to turn and look longingly at that man whose importance as Savior was summed up in the words;

“Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

Without pretext, without hedging, we may actually sing and fully mean it:

*Just as I am without one plea,
But that your blood was shed for me,
O lamb of God, I come.*

Jesus raises the spiritual and moral bar to new heights and depths. This isn't a message of “do what you want and all will be well.” The message of the Sermon on the Mount isn't that it's all impossible so don't even try. These teachings about reconciliation, about working at handling anger with care and intentionality, about going to the other person with whom there is conflict before coming to God with our gifts of worship and giving: they aren't to be ignored, difficult as they might be. Who we are is tied up in our relationships with each other. Who we are is tied up in a clear conscience when we come before God to worship. Jesus wasn't kidding about reconciliation and lusting in the heart and saying “yes” or “no” and meaning it. They all affect our relationships with each other and with God. But alongside these challenges, he allows himself to be lifted up, high on a cross, and with that radical, impossible gift, Jesus demonstrates that amazing grace is near and freely available for all who aim high yet fall short. Without that cross up on the hill of Golgotha, the Sermon on the Mount would lead to nothing but despair.

So work on handling anger and conflict in ways that seek resolution and reconciliation. Maybe there is a relationship right now that you are being called upon to work towards resolution. Jesus' teachings are clear about doing so. We are to create right relationships, but also recognize that God's grace has the final word.