

**February 12, 2023. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

Let us pray. O God, what the world says and what you say are often at odds. Set before us now your truth as we hear your Word and as we respond in faithful trust. Amen.

This morning, we read from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 21 to 37.

Listen now for the word of the lord. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,

‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,<sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.<sup>25</sup> Come 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.<sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’<sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.<sup>29</sup> If 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.<sup>30</sup> And 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.<sup>31</sup> “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’<sup>32</sup> But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.<sup>33</sup> “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.’<sup>34</sup> But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,<sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.<sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.<sup>37</sup> Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Here, we find ourselves in the middle of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The sermon on the mount is found only in Matthew’s Gospel, It is a collection of some of Jesus’ most famous teachings – in total, the sermon on the mount is three chapters long and happens at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry.

Jesus is baptized by John, then goes into the wilderness for 40 days to be tested by the Devil. After resisting the Devil's temptations, he goes to Galilee to begin his ministry and call his first disciples.

And as he travels through Galilee teaching and healing, word about him starts to spread, and great crowds start to follow him.

Jesus sees the crowd that has gathered, so he goes up the mountain. His disciples follow him there and Jesus begins to teach them, and thus begins the sermon on the mount.

He's so captivating in how he speaks and what he teaches, that here at the beginning of the sermon on the mount, he's teaching to his disciples. But as he spoke, more and more people from the crowd must have heard and followed to hear him speak more – because when Jesus finishes speaking, Matthew writes that the crowds were astounded at his teaching.

And in this specific part of the sermon on the mount I think you can see why. He speaks with passion, with controversy, striking fear but also intrigue and curiosity. A combination that likely had the crowd desperately holding on to each and every word. And in this specific part, Jesus is teaching about the Law in the Torah.

The gospel of Matthew paints Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, and through this teaching, we get a vivid picture of what it means for Jesus to fulfill the law.

Law is an intriguing thing. The earliest evidence of law codes dates back 24,000 years before Christ, and some two thousand years after Christ, law is very much still woven into the fabric of societies and cultures all around the world.

Law at its best allows communities to flourish in safety and equality, but at its worst, law, when corrupt by human power and ambition, destroys communities and lives. Which is why intention matters.

We can follow the letter of the law, but it's when we know the heart of the law – the law's intention – that's when communities are transformed.

Law has a special place in the history of Israel. After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they cut a covenant with God to become God's people. After doing so, God then gave them laws or commandments as part of that covenant to help them learn how to be God's people. To essentially give them guidelines.

But it's never that easy. Human imperfection steps in and the people broke the law – most famously by worshipping the golden calf right after the 10 commandments were given.

But God loves them and forgives them, and they remain God's own.

But over the course of the history of Israel, the cycle remains. Of receiving God's commandments, breaking them, then forgiveness and reconciliation.

So, Jesus takes that law, here on the sermon on the mount, and interprets it anew. He doesn't negate them or say they are wrong or throw them away. Instead, Jesus expands and enlarges these prohibitions. To show the heart of what God is saying through these laws, their intention. He interprets them to show what these laws reveal about God and being God's people and how that should shape their everyday life.

Jesus talks about anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths. While different, at their core, they all deal with broken relationships.

Our God is one who desires to be in relationship. When God cut a covenant with the Israelites, God entered into relationship with them.

The Christian understanding of a triune God is also a God in relationship. Father, son, holy spirit. To be God's people, to be created in the image of God – is to be in right relationship with God and with each other.

So, Jesus essentially here says yes, you know not to murder. But it's not enough to just not murder. If you let the anger you have for another grow and build until it destroys that relationship, anger in your everyday life that in its extreme, can lead to murder, that goes against God's law too in a way akin to murder. The intention of that law is to make you aware of the ways anger can prevent you from being God's people in relationship to each other and God.

So, instead, let the anger you feel towards someone drive you to reconciliation. To reflect God's image in the way you live your life is to take that which is supposed to alienate you from people lead you to them.

Jesus says you know not to commit adultery, but it's not enough to just not commit adultery. The way men lust for women who aren't their wives reduces them to just another object to have. Treating women – or any person or group of people – as an object you can own – prohibits you from being in right relationship with them. It prohibits you from seeing God's image in them.

To be God's people is to see each person with respect for their humanity, to see them as an equal.

So, Jesus says this all starts with intention. Look at women not with lust rooted in ownership, but with love rooted in mutual respect and equality. The law in the Torah has specific conditions that allow for divorce – but Jesus says that is not enough. Marriage in Jesus' context was not about love – it was essentially a social contract or transaction – with women bought and sold. Women had no means to support themselves outside of

marriage, their livelihood depended on marriage. And if they were divorced – they were left vulnerable and helpless.

So, Jesus says it's not enough to divorce your wife and leave her vulnerable and alone, for just any reason.

To be in right relationship is to treat your spouse as your equal and to care for their wellbeing. To again, not treat them as object to own or throw away. Jesus says to not swear falsely, yes – but also, to not make any oaths at all.

And the reason is quite simple. To live in community as God's people – you must do so with honesty.

If you must swear an oath to prove your truthfulness, it means there are times when your word isn't trusted.

To be in right relationship, you must be honest and speak with intention. If you do so, you don't need oaths.

Later, in Matthew's gospel, he's asked what is the greatest commandment? And he responds: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

It's really all about love. To be God's people, to be created in the image of God is to love each other with the radical love God has for us. God has given us the guidelines of how to do that, but still, all too often we don't follow them.

But Jesus, as the fulfillment of the law, shows us that God's intention matters.

Why should we follow the laws? It shouldn't be just to obey God, so we get everlasting life in heaven. We should follow them not for reward but maybe simply because we love God. And to love God is to be in right relationship with each other. To love each other with such a radical love that communities and people are transformed, reconciled, and truly equal.

Jesus' words on that mountain top – the words that captivated whole crowds to flock to him just to hear what he had to say – they're all we need to live a righteous life as God's own.

Knowing this doesn't make it any easier: but the grace of God in Jesus Christ is this: we don't do this on our own.

Christ is working through us. Giving us hope that through the love we strive to have for each other, God's kingdom is breaking in. And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.