

Sermon Epiphany VI Year A 2017

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

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A lifetime of reading and hearing scripture brings forth words that echo from my childhood. When I was a child my mother was very clear that there were words that the Bible said we were not to use. These words were the very words Jesus addressed this morning. Fool was was not to be uttered in my childhood home. My mother was clear and would admonish us immediately. The same would happen with the word, hate. You couldn't say that you hated someone. No matter the offense you could not resort to saying you hated them. You could dislike someone but you must never say hate. Yet, today we call one another incredibly offensive names. This must be disappointing to God.

Perhaps this is no different from any Sunday but I noticed that our readings contained strong admonitions. Maybe you noticed this as well. From our OT lesson, "But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish."

Paul writing to the Christians in Corinth observed, "There is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?" To Jesus in Matt. "You will be liable to judgment or to the Council or to the hell of fire." Yikes. We better be careful.

Our Gospel lesson continues Jesus' teaching from his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by focusing on the commandment, "You shall not murder." Now there is a commandment that most of us can say we have observed faithfully. But immediately, we sense trouble in the opening line. Jesus is not just calling us to keep the commandment; he has a higher calling in mind. "You have heard that it was said in 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." Uh oh. Judgment just for being angry? We're in trouble now. Jesus begins with the commandment and then takes us deeper, to the

feelings and emotions that are the basis of the commandments. Jesus seems to be making the requirements of a faithful life even more demanding.

For the past few weeks we have experienced a very conflicted and emotional beginning to a presidential term. Emotions, including anger, have been readily apparent from all sides of our national dialogue. There are many causes for this. Yet, Jesus would have us all forsake anger.

This isn't a new concept; the psalms encourage us to be careful of anger as well. (Quote, "leave rage alone, it leads only to evil.") Jesus takes us beyond the familiar commandments encouraging us to address the emotions that lie at their root. Living faithfully isn't as simple as not committing murder; it is controlling our temper and anger as well. Jesus makes us accountable for our thoughts, even thoughts that we don't act upon. Being a disciple of Jesus is not easy.

Suddenly the choices before us do not seem so straightforward. It isn't just murder that we are to avoid, but anger as well. It seems that Jesus knows something that neuroscientists have discovered. Anger is a complex emotion. There is a part that we cannot control, that is the automatic (autonomic) response that occurs when something happens. (for example: cut off in traffic). But that automatic response only lasts for 90 seconds. 90 seconds later the immediate neuromediators have dispersed. Anger that lasts longer is anger that we are actively maintaining, nourishing, cultivating. This anger has something to do with our personal choice. Jesus is encouraging us to let that anger go.

Sin isn't limited to actions but incorporates our thoughts as well. And after all that I have been thinking these past weeks, I can see that I am in real trouble now. Perhaps you are feeling vulnerable as well.

We live in a world filled with fear. And it isn't just terrorists making us fearful. In these unusual times, political leaders foment fear as well. The danger is that fear leads to anger and anger leads to hatred. This is a kind of poison if we allow it to increase. These emotions can damage us. This damage can occur on psychological, biological, and spiritual levels.

We have been focusing on the works of C.S. Lewis in our Sunday Forum sessions in Magill Hall. Lewis was quoted from his *Screwtape Letters* in a recent article in the journal, *Christian Century*. "Hatred," wrote C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape to Wormwood*, ". . . is often the compensation by which a frightened

man reimburses himself for the miseries of fear. The more he fears, the more he will hate.” (Lutheran publisher and pastor, Peter W. Marty from Christian Century, January 4, 2017)

But of course there is more in the gospel this morning. Jesus doesn't just address our anger, as difficult as that is to control, no he kept going. “You have heard it said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Every time I encounter this scripture it reminds me the relative innocence of politics in the 1970's. Jimmy Carter was once asked by a reporter if he had sinned? In response, he admitted to lusting after women in his heart. For this admission, he was widely criticized. Oh, how times have changed.

Following Jesus is no easy task. We can't create daydreams of lust and believe that just because we didn't act on the desire that it has no impact upon us. We get a cue to how strongly Jesus feels about this by his language that follows. When Jesus addresses the sin of lust, Jesus waxes into hyperbolic, metaphoric language. Jesus is not really calling us to cut off body parts, but he wants us to know that our thoughts have consequences that can last a lifetime and beyond.

Jesus then addressed divorce. In that day, men could divorce a woman on a whim, by writing a certificate of divorce. Jesus again holds them to a higher calling. Only infidelity might be grounds for divorce.

Lastly, Jesus addressed honesty in communication. We are not to swear falsely or otherwise. Not swearing (another thing I was not to do in childhood.) We are to respond clearly with simple straightforward answers. Yes or No.

Jesus isn't just calling our attention to the action but the thought beneath it. To follow Jesus requires a transformation of heart. Transforming ourselves from being judgmental, fearful, and angry won't come easily. We believe that these feelings are justified. Self-righteousness is rampant today. I must admit that I am as guilty as any.

We cannot denigrate another child of God. We so want to separate into like/dislike, good/bad. But following Jesus allows us no such comfort, no simplistic options. All are children of God.

We have much work to do as we join God and are drawn into bringing into existence the kingdom of God in our world and our lives. There are no simple

answers. We cannot offload this responsibility to others. This is our work to do, over and over. We must be able to look upon and see every other person as a child of God.

Will Rogers memorably said, “I never met a person I didn’t like.” Jesus is calling us to get to know one another on a deep level. To know people to a point that we can see and acknowledge the good in them. We can’t write anyone off, as tempting as that may be.

This includes people who are different from ourselves. Whether religiously, politically, ethnically, whatever the difference. To offload our insecurities on others is worshipping a lesser god. Jesus calls us higher, to respect the dignity of every human being. Jesus calls us into relationship with those who think and act like us. But just as importantly with those who appear, think, and act differently.

How might we go about this? I enjoy “people watching” at airports but this is not a harmless pastime. Because at the root of what I am doing lies judgement and worse. My watching is really judgment. “At least I’m not like that person.”

I don’t recall the author’s name but in order to overcome the tendency to look at others disparagingly, this author went to the airport and each person they saw they would say to themselves, “child of God.” They did this for days, until it finally stuck.

I have been reading *The Book of Joy* which talks about finding lasting happiness in a changing world. It is a collaboration between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. How we view one another makes all the difference. The Dalai Lama looks upon every person he encounters and says, “human being.” Tutu looks upon everyone and says, “child of God.” Both approaches give value to each person that these holy people encounter. This allows them to greet everyone with warmth, care and concern.

This process is a continual one because events happen; people say and do things that challenge us deeply. This calls forth a response that must begin inside ourselves first. What is the basis for our action? Is it self-interest, fear, anger or are our actions coming from love?

The author who quoted from CS Lewis earlier was Peter Marty. ?Repeat the beginning? He continued by saying, “Plotting the misery index of fear in our individual lives and communities explains why so many scared people are

busily reimbursing themselves with hate. But people of deep faith don't play that reimbursement game. They're focused on wearing down hate-filled souls through beautiful acts of love."

These examples of love are seen by others who read our actions each day and then they in turn are influenced and act accordingly. As parents, as students, as co-workers, as volunteers all our efforts count. Because our actions influence those around us for the good. What does it look like to walk in love as Christ loved us? A story from our Day School. End with story of Ana Meyer and new student Eden in chapel.