

02/16/14 -- Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

“The Law- For Our Sake”

Scripture: *Deuteronomy 30:15-20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37*

Moses says to the Hebrew people,

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days...” (Deut 30:19-20).

“Choosing Life” means choosing God and the ways of God. Or, to put it in the same words as our Jewish brothers and sisters, “Keeping the Law”. The reason we *choose* to follow the commandments of God and, therefore, the commandments of God’s Son Jesus Christ, is because it leads to *life*.

Jesus says in John 10,

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

He is echoing the words of Moses we hear this morning. And just as Moses has tied the Law to choosing Life, so also Jesus ties our life to the Law of Moses. Remember, last week, Jesus said,

“I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” the Law. Then he says,

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

The Sermon on the Mount, which is Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Law of Moses for all humankind, sets an exceptionally high standard.

And right there is the difficulty. We read the 10 Commandments, the Law of Moses, Jesus’ call in the Sermon on the Mount and most of us, if you are anything like me, feel pressed down by the requirements, smothered by all the rules and all the thinking required now:

Am I doing this right?

Will God approve?

Did I break a commandment there?

What would Jesus do?

A life of constant second-guessing and guilt is what these questions all lead to. Think for a moment about all the commandments you have broken. Think of all the wrongs that have been committed against you.

Now, listen to what Jesus says about some of your reactions to those wrongs, some of your attitudes towards the Law. He says,

“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 are liable to judgment...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...You have heard it said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, give her a certificate of divorce', but I say to you, divorce forces a woman to commit adultery...You have heard it said, 'You shall not swear (an oath) falsely, but I say do not swear at all.'

I didn't make you feel better about your guilt and your failure to live up to the Law, either in the Old Testament or in the New, did I?

In fact, Jesus has made it even worse, for God's sake!

There is a reason for this, I think, and it has very little to do with our personal feelings about it. William Barclay, a great Scottish theologian from the early 1900s, says this about the exceptional standard Jesus expects from his followers.

*"The new standard (of Jesus) kills all pride, and forces us to Jesus Christ who alone can enable us to rise to that standard which he himself has set before us."
(Commentary on Matthew, Vol 1. pg 137).*

Barclay says something important here. We are indeed called to a very high standard, a standard which exceeds even the scribes and the Pharisees. And we can only meet the standard by relying on the one who calls us to that standard. If, then, we are relying completely on the presence of Christ in our lives, and we know the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, what does that say about our guilt and our pressure to achieve the demands of the Law?

Well, I would suggest it says far more about us and what we think of ourselves, much less of God, than anything about what a life in Christ actually looks like.

Here is a poem/prayer by Marianne Williamson which speaks to exactly this problem we have created for ourselves:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just in some; it is in everyone.

And, as we let our own light shine, we consciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others

(from A Return to Love, "A Prayer for the Higher Self" by Marianne Williamson).

We hear the Law and Jesus' revision of it in Matthew 5 as a threat. This says more about us than about that greater way of being to which Jesus calls us. The threats, the fear, the wilting of self we experience in the face of our failure, our deliberate breaking of these commandments, our trained and unconscious overlooking of the breaking of these commandments all around us all stand as a witness against us that we have not chosen Life.

As a result of not choosing life, not choosing the ways of God, we feel ourselves outside the blessings of God. Isn't that exactly what Moses said to the people before they crossed into the Promised Land?

So let's try to extend Jesus' admonitions today into that higher self Marianne Williamson calls us to. I believe that Jesus is pushing us toward a higher way of being by speaking of the commandments and Law in the way he is today.

Today, Jesus is calling us to look at anger, adultery, divorce and the swearing of oaths, or promise-making (as we called it in our exploration of the 10 Commandments) as ways of living into the Law for *our sake, not to prove something to God and others*, as ways of choosing life. In other words, as we said last week, these are gifts of God for our benefit.

Anger, Jesus tells us, is at the base of any act of murder. And so, anytime we are angry with someone, we have already willingly diminished another in our own eyes. Jesus gives us several examples - straight-up anger toward another; calling another names, such as 'fool'; and seeking retribution in the courts.

The higher standard, however, is encompassed in Jesus' call to reconciliation -

"if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and sister, and then come offer your gift" (Mat 5:23-24).

In other words, our reconciliation with God is dependent upon our reconciliation with others. Reconciliation demands we see the image of God in the Other, in the one we have diminished in our own eyes. Reconciliation means we seek *mutual respect* with others.

This higher standard of *mutual respect* is a daily practice. Some of us may struggle more with anger towards another than others, and nor does seeking mutual respect, seeking the image of God in another, mean an end to anger. But it does mean we understand that beyond anger is always the promise of reconciliation.

Jesus' call to a higher way of being regarding anger extends into not carrying around judgment and grudges toward another. Reconciliation means recognizing the *wholeness of the Other*. We are complete people in the eyes of God. We are far, far greater in the eyes of God and Christ than we are in our own eyes. Why else would Jesus

push us to such a standard if he were not there to help us achieve that standard? As Williamson says, *we are playing small and it serves no one*. Failure while striving for the high standard of Christ is very different from the stagnation of self and inaction of spirit from never having tried at all out of fear.

Recognizing that we are made whole in God and Christ means I always recognize that the person I am with is in some way reflecting the light of Christ right now. That other person may or may not recognize it, but if you recognize the light of God and Christ shining in them and help it shine, they may recognize the source of that light very soon. Our grudges and judgments block that light in ourselves and in our ability to see that light in others.

In the eternal worldview of God, our wholeness is simply a perception issue because we are beholden to time and space. In the eternal eyes of God, that future wholeness of our being is already a done deal, reconciled as we are to him by Christ on the Cross and his Resurrection.

Jesus' words about adultery and divorce need to be made sense of in relation to the times he lived, and we need to recognize that the words still apply today as well. Back in Jesus' day, women were less than slaves. In Rome, baby girls were left on hillsides to be killed by the elements. In Greece, women were not even considered property. Slaves were, but not wives. And in Israel, women were considered somewhat like animals that could talk. It was a horrible existence, certainly from our 21st century perspective. In all three cultures - Roman, Greek and Jewish - men were free to sleep around, use prostitutes and divorce at will. In all three cultures, divorce was a sentence to a life of poverty and despair.

That was then. Now, thank God, women in the West at least have many more freedoms. In much of our language, if not in practice, women are considered equals, which is as it should be. Remember, inequality among the sexes is part of the curse from Genesis 3. If Jesus reconciles us completely in the eyes of God, which is what we say and preach in our tradition, why in the world would we want to continue to live out of a curse which has been invalidated by the work of Jesus Christ? In other words, in Christ we are all equal, which is as it should be, just as it was before the Fall.

So what I hear in Jesus' admonition about adultery and divorce is a call to the higher standard of *usefulness*. Saint Augustine once said that God gave us people to love and things to use, and sin, in short, is the confusion of the two: we use people and love things. We only truly become useful to one another and to God when we are acting out of love and loving one another. When we use one another, we are useless to God and each other. Paul says to Philemon of his former slave, Onesimus,

“Formerly (when he was your slave), he was useless to you, but now (that we, all of us, are living out of the equality available in the love of Christ) he is indeed useful to both you and to me...(Onesimus is) no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...” (Phil 11,16).

When mutual respect and the recognition of the wholeness of the Other is present in the love of Christ, we recognize one another as co-workers in the garden of God and Christ, co-equals in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the mutual respect we show one another, the expectation of the presence of the whole person in God's eyes and our equal usefulness under God leads to how we are with one another in our public relationships. We act as the *truth-filled and truthful* emissaries of the light of Christ. When Jesus speaks about oaths sworn, he is speaking about the cavalier use of the name of God to justify our inability to uphold promises and transactions made. The higher standard of Christ means we can no longer use people as a means to an end, which is often what promises and transactions become in our world.

Being enlightened by Christ means being truthful in all our encounters. This is why Jesus says, "*Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'.*" Don't give into subterfuge or disassembly in the face of a promise. The reason for this is because now that we are living in such a way that we respect others as carriers of the image of God, that we are made whole in the work of Christ for us and that God will make us useful in the Lord's world out of love for us, we have no reason to not be truthful and honest in all our interactions and dealings. In fact, we know that we need not swear in God's name because God oversees all promises made once our lives are dedicated to God. William Barclay goes further to say we should, as Christians, live in such a way that we never *need* to be asked to swear an oath.

Jesus tells us these things because we are called to a higher standard for the sake of *our* joy and hope in this world. It is not to deny the pain and suffering caused by our failure or inaction, but it is to push us into a higher way of being, for our sake. Jesus was given to us not for God's sake, but for ours. As Marianne Williamson said, "*We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.*" So out of mutual respect, wholeness in Christ, our equal usefulness in the gifts of the Spirit and the truth we share with one another, may it always be so that we live for God's sake, since all God has done has been for our sake.

Amen.