

6 Epiphany Year A

Lections: Deut. 30:15-20; Ps. 119:1-8; 1 Cor. 3:1-9; Matt. 5:21-37

Almighty God, you give us commandments not so that we will use them to judge each other, but instead to call us ever deeper into your great and unending Love. Give us your grace, the grace we need to choose again and again the abundant life you dream for us. Amen.

Good morning Grace Church! What a privilege it is to break open Word again with you this morning. If you are wondering why we're a small crowd this morning, I promise you it is not because of the Scripture readings we just heard. No, it is our parish retreat weekend and so 50 of our members are at our diocesan camp in New Hampshire.

So while it is a privilege and a joy to preach this morning, to be quite honest, it is also a challenge. I don't know about you, but all this talk of commandments and ordinances in our readings—of sins, judgments, and punishments—well, it reminds me of a version of Christianity I thought I had left far behind as a teenager. In the Pentecostal church I grew up in, it seemed being Christian was conditional on “the right” behavior and belief.

As a result, I often swung between feeling very sorry for all the times I fell short or very resentful at feeling judged by my family and my church. In that context, it was easy to lose sight that being Christian and following Jesus *was always* supposed to be all about Love.

And believe it or not, today's Gospel reading, even with all its talk of judgment and punishment, springs from what Jesus wants to show us about God's love and how it works. After all, we are still sitting with Jesus as he gives the Sermon on the Mount.

It was at the beginning of this chapter that Jesus pronounces the Beatitudes, those promises of blessing which show that God dreams of a radical transformation of this broken world. Last week, we heard that Jesus calls us to be part of that transformation by being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. So, the first part of the Sermon on the Mount gives us the “What,” which is God's dream of lifting up the poor, the persecuted, and the peacemakers, of blessing the meek and the mournful.

This morning, we begin to get a glimpse of the “How.” How do we participate in God's transformative blessing? How do we follow Jesus in being salt and light for a world in desperate need of both flavor and vision.

“Follow the commandments,” Jesus, a most faithful Jew, tells his followers. Keep the Law of Moses, which a gracious God gave to His people on a mountaintop as well. As Deuteronomy tells us, choosing to obey God's commandments means to choose life and goodness, blessing and happiness.

But Jesus doesn't just want us to keep God's commandments. He wants us to fulfill them in their entirety. In the long tradition of Hebrew prophets, he wants us to go beyond the letter of the Law and teach us something about its spirit.

So he gives us examples. “Do not murder” is perhaps the most universal of moral and ethical teachings. Cheating on a spouse. Swearing to tell the truth and then lying. These actions are obvious

moral failures. But simply avoiding these major transgressions doesn't come close to the transformed and abundant life that God deeply desires for us.

Because underneath any action that breaks these commandments are the discreet, everyday disordered feelings, thoughts, and words that also separate us from each other *and* from our true, beloved selves. Long before anyone gets close to murder, they experience an *excessive* anger that won't seek or accept an apology. And before any adultery, objectifying desire has to take root in the heart. And while lying after swearing to tell the truth is both morally and legally wrong, we often say a lot of things we don't actually mean, either out of fear or pride, *way* before we end up in any courtroom.¹

Of course, we can't control our feelings and I don't think Jesus is saying that merely experiencing them is the problem. Even negative emotions give us helpful information about our relationships.

Take anger. We get angry when someone has transgressed our boundaries. The problem Jesus is pointing out is when we hold on to or express our anger in unhealthy ways: proceeding to insults, name-calling, and grudge-holding. These behaviors rupture relationships and obstruct us from loving our neighbors, no murder required.

Or consider disingenuous conversations, which may come as a result of us feeling afraid or wanting to impress. Even if they don't rise to the legal level of perjury, the result is that others trust us less, and that lack of trust harms our relationships.

The same equation holds for lust and adultery. As any woman can tell you and the #MeToo movement of the last few years has made clear, the objectification of the male gaze is dehumanizing, even if a man never acts on those desires. Jesus wants his male disciples, and all who hold power over others, to examine that part of themselves and to get better at choosing the path that leads to life for all genders.

All these are real impairments to the loving, life-giving, and liberating relationships, even if our actions may fall short of the explicit prohibitions of the commandments. Our tradition has a word for such impairments, though we may not like to talk about it much: sin.

Sin does not simply mean we broke the rules. As any parent can tell you, rules come from a place of love. God gave the people of Israel the commandments, the Law, to help them become the people God desired them, and desires us all to be, a people on the Way of Love. It's true that breaking the commandments we've been talking about here—murder, adultery, lying—does real harm to our neighbors. But the "sin" lies in what these actions represent. The choice to murder or cheat or lie is also a choice to distance oneself from God. That distance from where God desires us to be and where our choices have left us, is the sin.

So what Jesus is saying here is that our thoughts, words, and feelings that lead up to those actions also create a similar distance between us and God *because* of the effects they have on our neighbors. And so yes, excessive anger, objectifying looks, and less-than-honest communication are sins not

¹ I'm grateful to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Matt. 5:21-37 in *The Message* Bible for this idea.

because they in themselves make God unhappy, but because they harm the relationships we have with one another, they get in the way of love, and that *does* make God unhappy.

But please hear this, so-aptly named Grace Church. We can't ever talk about sin without also talking about God's unlimited grace and mercy.

Yes, Jesus raises the stakes on our behavior, putting our inner lives up for moral examination alongside external actions. But by doing that, he also raises our awareness of just how deep and how wide God's grace is. If you now find yourself thinking of all the times you have held on to your anger or looked at someone like an object or said something you didn't mean, God's grace is already at work in you, just by asking those questions. By putting these on the same moral level as The Commandments, Jesus is expanding the playing field for God's mercy. By calling attention to the many small ways we can hurt each other, he is calling our attention to the infinite ways God can and will forgive us, no conditions attached. And there is nothing small about that. And all we have to do is accept it and extend it. Blessed are those who receive grace and mercy, because they will be gracious and merciful.

So be encouraged my friends, for it is Jesus's life, death, and resurrection that makes us worthy and able to love God and walk in Her ways. May we always choose that life, that goodness, that blessing. Amen.