

“Fractured Relationships”
Sunday, February 12, 2017
6th Sunday after the Epiphany

 **Matthew 5:21-37 (CEB)**

Law of murder

“You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *‘Don’t commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment.’*

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment.

If they say to their brother or sister, *‘You idiot,’* they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, *‘You fool,’* they will be in danger of fiery hell.

Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go.

First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift.

Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court.

Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there until you've paid the very last penny.

Law of adultery

“You have heard that it was said, ‘*Don't commit adultery.*’ But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart.

And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell.

Law of divorce

“It was said, *‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a divorce certificate.’* But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness forces her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Law of solemn pledges

“Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: *‘Don’t make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord.’* But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it’s God’s throne. You must not pledge by the earth, because it’s God’s footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it’s the city of the great king. And you must not pledge by your head, because you can’t turn one hair white or black.

Let your “**yes**” mean yes, and your “**no**” mean no.

Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[MESSAGE]

My guess is that many of you have heard this scripture before; it is part of the *Sermon on the Mount*.

However, it may be a passage that you have not often heard preached; some preachers will avoid this text because it touches on issues that are uncomfortable to talk about.

What we need to do is to try to hear what Jesus is saying in his context and then imagine what he might be saying in ours.

This section of the sermon is clearly intended to re-interpret ancient scripture for a new audience.

Jesus' statements do not contradict the original law, they transcend it and challenge the hearer to live Torah in a new way.

From this perspective, we must understand the culture into which Jesus speaks and how these laws apply in their context.

I believe we should also attempt to imagine how our context should receive these same challenges.

Jesus speaks into our context and challenges us to live in a new way as well.

I fear that some of us may hear parts of this text in particularly personal ways that may impede our ability to see through to the underlying message from Jesus.

Let us look at each section of the text, one-by-one, and realize that what Jesus is really talking about here are ***Fractured Relationships***.

Let us pray...Lord, be with us this morning as we engage your word. Help us to see past our personal feelings so that we might hear the message you have for us. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

Jesus addresses four issues here: anger, adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths.

In each case, Jesus begins with, “*you have heard that it was said...*” and moves to, “*but I say to you...*”

The intent seems to be to show how the deeper intent of the original command is lived out.

Jesus speaks from the perspective that the Kingdom of God is “*at hand*” – it is being realized even now.

His “re-interpretation” of the Law, then, invites us to *live* as kingdom people.

The common theme in these four issues deals with broken relationships from the perspective of the Kingdom of God.

“*Thou shalt not kill*” is the first commandment Jesus tackles here; that seems like a no-brainer, right?

First, we notice that he uses the term “*murder*,” which gives us the opportunity to debate the various ways we understand killing.

From combat to self-defense, there have long been disagreements about what God’s intention was.

Jesus seeks to bring some clarity; this command is not simply about the actual taking of another person’s life – it is also about human relationships.

Anger can destroy a relationship just as murder takes life.

Jesus points out that it really doesn't matter who caused the problem in your relationship; the person who first notices the difficulty is responsible for taking steps toward reconciliation.

Placing blame is not important; mending the relationship is the goal.

Sometimes I think that is much of what is wrong with many personal relationships and with our culture: we are just too interested in placing *blame*.

If we treated one another better in the first place, there would be less fracturing of our relationships.

When difficulties do come up we could fix things a lot faster if we stopped trying to fix blame.

“He started it!” is a common juvenile and immature response when our children disagree.

As adults, this should not be our first response and it should not govern the way in which we seek reconciliation.

Most of the time, there is plenty of blame to go around and we just need to get over ourselves and move on.

“You shall not commit adultery” is next on Jesus’ list; it’s hard to argue with this one.

Yet, as obvious as this may seem, there must be something more that Jesus wants us to understand.

Think for a moment about what adultery means – it destroys God’s purpose for marriage.

This relationship is intended for mutuality and adultery is a selfish act.

Jesus goes so far as to include just *thinking* about another person.

Obviously, we cannot always control the thoughts that pop into our heads.

We can, however, control the subjects upon which we choose to meditate.

In modern times, this leads us to include pornography in this commandment.

I think the deeper meaning here is that marriage is about mutual respect.

I think we can consider Jesus' admonitions about tearing out our eyes and cutting off our hands as hyperbole.

What he seems to be telling us is that we must deal with any impulse that could lead to the destruction of community if this relationship.

That leads us into the discussion on divorce; this is often where people get uncomfortable.

We recognize that, for a variety of reasons, nearly half of marriages end in divorce.

I do not believe that we should bring this text into our context and chastise everyone we know who has been divorced; that misses the deeper meaning of what Jesus offers us.

First and foremost, God offers us grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

I think there are a couple things at work in this passage about divorce.

First, the ancient divorce laws were about property, not relationships.

Women had no rights and no protection if they were turned away by their husbands.

Jesus seeks to change this attitude by equalizing the blame; both husband and wife share fault and consequences.

It sounds like Jesus assumes that the marriage relationship can be shaped by the presence of God's kingdom; ideally, this should be true.

Our experience tells us that some marriages are resistant to the work of God and may better be served by freeing the couple to live into other relationships.

That leads me to what I hear underlying this text that is particularly relevant today.

I believe that too many marriages fail because they are based on a *wedding* that quickly fades from view.

People “*fall in love*” and plan a wedding, rather than planning a **life**.

Please, do not hear me trying to second guess anyone here who has experienced divorce.

I do not know your circumstances and I am not a marriage counselor.

However, I do counsel couples who are preparing to get married and my goal is always to plan a marriage, not a wedding.

If more care was given to cultivating a relationship and seeking God's guidance, fewer divorces would be needed.

Finally, Jesus speaks to us about integrity: "Let your 'yes' mean yes and your '**no**' mean no."

This is definitely an "ideal" that many find hard to visualize in modern times.

With contracts, pre-nuptial agreements, and swearing to tell the truth in court, we have grown less and less trusting.

There is plenty of evidence around us that too many people cannot be trusted.

Jesus offers a vision of how integrity might look.

Those who embody the Kingdom of God will speak truthfully and, if more of the world was truthful, there would be less need for swearing an oath.

The purpose of these admonitions from Jesus today is to promote supportive relationships.

Fractionousness in our culture is a consequence of our failure to rectify broken relationships.

God seeks a realm where love prevails and we live in relationship with one another.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**