

“You’ve Heard It Said”

Epiphany 6

Deuteronomy 30:15-29; Matthew 5:21-37

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer of Illumination: *By your grace, startle us again with your word to us in Holy Scripture. May it bring us more than we're looking for. If we need comfort, may it comfort us. If we need to be dis comforted, may it dis comfort us... for our own good. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

We'll all going to hell! That seems to be what Jesus is saying in this passage. When a colleague came into my office this week, I now know why she gave me a strange look when she heard the song "Hell in a Handbasket" by the Grateful Dead playing on my computer. I told her it was "research!"

Jesus has a lot to say in this famous teaching from the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 5 through 7, which we continue to hear in these weeks after Epiphany. In these two chapters, Jesus lays it all out. He doesn't seem to hold back anything. Particularly today, anger, adultery, divorce, and swearing falsely.

I am sure more than a few of you are wondering why we didn't just skip this reading all together and get on to something more cheerful. Some of you may not like this passage one bit, or maybe you'd prefer to rest with other parts of the Sermon on the Mount,

like the “lilies of the field” or “where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”

Upon further reading the onerous passages appear. The parts of loving your enemies, direction about not being hypocrite, and a warning against religious leaders who smile too much. 😊. Today’s text gives us a run for our money. I want to offer that if we listen to the whole Sermon on the Mount, I guarantee we’ll feel uncomfortable...which is not something we like very much.¹

Jesus expands the understanding of the laws that were known in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus says, “You’ve heard it said,” when he refers to laws dating back centuries. And then Jesus seems to give more detailed examples of the law. He says, “But I say to you.” The harsh truth comes next. Jesus spares no expense it seems. There is tough language here. It reeks of judgment. It oozes condemnation. And this is part of what makes us feel so uncomfortable. It’s a heavy dose of the law and a heavy sentence for disobeying the law.

At first glance, the passages from Deuteronomy and Matthew seem to reinforce a picture of God who makes and enforces the law. Maybe you think of God who wields power through warning and accusation. But perhaps, we can find a more helpful way to think of

¹ Rev. Amy Butler, Opinion, February 7, 2017. <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-sermon-on-the-mount-is-counter-cultural-thats-the-point/#.WJ-1-m8rLIV>

God's law and perhaps frame a clearer picture of the God we worship.

For instance, the Law is given always as a gift. The law captured in the Ten Commandments, is life's little instruction book, God's gift to help us get more from this life. God gives the Ten Commandments only after God has already declared that Israel is God's people.

The Law is not the means by which to become God's people or to earn God's love, but rather as a gift given to God's people because God loves them. It frames how we are to be in relationship with God and with each other.

Secondly, the law is given to strengthen the community. The law isn't about meeting our individual needs but about creating and sustaining a community in which all of God's children can find nurture, health, safety and blessing. The biblical focus on community is simple. When you're looking out for yourself, it's you against the world. When you look out for others in your community, and they in turn look out for you, it's the community together that faces the challenges, setbacks and opportunities the world offers.

Third, the law becomes a gift to strengthen community by orienting us to the needs of our neighbor. The law isn't meant to

remove the neighbor and his or her concerns from our view but rather draws us to our neighbor more closely.²

Jesus suggests we need to take responsibility to care for those around us. In that there is reconciliation with one another and with God. Too quickly we can discriminate, injure, neglect, or speak poorly of a neighbor all the while saying, “I have kept the commandment because I have not murdered.” But Jesus, challenges the disciples and he challenges us. By caring for our neighbor we strengthen a community that can best serve as a blessing to the world. It’s God’s constant command and expectation of God’s people.

The teachings of Jesus today and from the Sermon on the Mount can land on our ears as a harsh judgment but they can also rest in our hearts in the remarkable ways that God administers a good and merciful judgment far and wide. In the interactions with our brother or sister or our partner about healing the relationship which is on shaky ground, Jesus says, forgive and be reconciled to one another. Our personal interactions are important for ensuring that the whole of God’s creation works as God intends. In our difficult and sometimes painful interactions with those we love, God makes all things new, no matter how damaged or broken the relationship.

² Davidlose.net. The section on Law from his weekly blog: <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-6a-on-love-and-law/>

So what if we looked at this through the lens of discipleship? Not only for our personal discipleship but for the growing of our discipleship as a community. Jesus uses this language to turn the perspective of the disciples outside themselves. They are not disciples for their own sakes, and their own actions, but for the sake of those around them. They are the ones who will carry Jesus message out and into the world. There is an accountability, a responsibility to the other for the sake of the good of the community.

We are certainly living in times when standing together as community, with one voice, with one heart, with one mission from God has never been more important. Now more than ever we need to live out the Bible's overarching themes of love and community and compassion toward the neighbor and the stranger.

We are being called as a people to live those themes out in our lives. We are also to remind ourselves that what happens in here, in worship, is connected to what happens out there. Two weeks ago, our staff and many of you joined over 250 people of faith in a public rally-an interfaith rally-on the front steps here at First Church. It was in opposition to the Executive Order of January 27th that would keep refugees from entering the country for 120 days and immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim nations out for three months.

Opposition to the executive order is consistent with the United Church of Christ positions, policies, actions and commitments. The rally was a reminder that opposition is consistent with being Christian. The surprise at that rally was the presence of two conservative Christian voices-not usually represented at such events. One pastor, Carl Ruby, serves a nondenominational church in Springfield, Ohio and identified himself as a conservative evangelical. He spoke passionately against the ban. He quoted scripture and referenced the life and example of Jesus Christ.

Time will tell how this country will welcome the stranger and reconcile with those whom we would call our neighbor. But I think the call for us as Christians is clear. We must resist that which would threaten our neighbor, and we must resist that which would block the stranger from knowing us and us from knowing them. The Greatest Commandment- Love God. Love our neighbor. That is clear. It is through love that God can repair that which is broken in our world.

Preacher Tom Long refers to this passage in Matthew and offers these words about the intersection of justice and worship and judgment and compassion.

Judgment is God's repairing of the broken creation. Judgment is God's scalpel carefully removing the malignant tissue that threatens life. Judgment is God's burning away of all that is cruel and spirit

killing in order that we may breathe the air of compassion. Judgment is good news; it is God setting things right.³

The message of Jesus is counter-cultural. The messages from the Sermon on the Mount are counter-cultural. When we live out our lives following the teachings of Jesus Christ, we can't help but be counter-cultural too.

In the coming weeks, I invite you to participate in our Adult faith formation class, which will address the common threads of advocacy and Christian witness. Come and be part of something so deeply integrated in our understanding. Come and explore how we as people of faith, and through the United Church of Christ are called to live out...this grace-filled, justice-infused, compassion-led faith as we follow the gospel of Jesus Christ. Come as we make connections and equip leaders to live out Jesus' message of compassion, peace and justice.

Jesus said it loud and clear in the Sermon on the Mount and on several other occasions: all God's rules for human living are summed up in the direction to love God and love our neighbor. Everything else springs from this work. To be a Christian in the

³ Tom Long, *Feasting on the World*, WJK, *Matthew*, p.97

way of Jesus we will, in fact, have to swim upstream in today's American culture.

You've heard it said, "Share what you have with anybody who needs it. Love your enemies. Live generous lives. Tell the truth. Act toward each other the way God acts toward you. Sacrifice something big for something good."⁴

I think Jesus is on to something.

Thanks be to God.

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⁴ Amy Butler, www.baptistnews.com. I am grateful for Rev. Butler's reflections on the times, as it helped frame this sermon.