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The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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Grace and peace to you from God — our light, our life, and our salvation. Amen.

Let's be honest, Church: in today's gospel reading from Matthew, we heard some of Jesus' most difficult and dramatic teachings. Whenever we hear such a reading in worship, I think it is unwise and even dangerous to leave it hanging in the air without addressing, wrestling with, and sometimes even confronting the text. We talked at length on Wednesday morning at Men's Bible Study this past week about the implications of this text for our lives, marriages, consciences, and even afterlives. It has to be dealt with.

At face value, these teachings — part of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount — seem to focus on four commandments which come in fact from the book of Deuteronomy, concerning anger, adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths. Now, I'm pretty confident that those four topics are not high on everyone's list of favorite sermon illustrations. Garrett is lucky he is at the Winter Walk this morning. Nevertheless, I think we need to wrestle with these teachings and do our best to try and understand what Jesus is saying.

In fact, I think it's impossible to ignore this reading, although I was tempted to preach on the passages we heard from Deuteronomy or the Psalms, because, after some study, I would propose that this passage is actually central to Jesus' message. Their placement is prominent. These teachings come toward the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, not long after the Beatitudes. So whatever Jesus is trying to say here, it isn't some obscure addendum, but might actually be crucial to our understanding of the Gospel itself. So, what do we make of these four teachings about the Law, and how do they point us toward some Good News for our lives today?

The first thing we need to understand about this passage is the rhetorical style itself. Jesus says immediately before this in Matthew that he has come not to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it. We heard that read last week. And so, we need to keep that in mind when we hear Jesus say "You have heard that it was said... But I say to you..." Four times we hear Jesus say that this morning. Biblical scholars call this antithetical rhetoric — pointing to one thing and then

suggesting something else. Pointing to one thing and then suggesting something else. But, we also need to keep in mind what Jesus said about fulfilling rather than abolishing the Law. Each “But I say to you...” statement is not a replacement, but rather an intensification of the principle. Jesus does not contrast an old and a new interpretation of the Law, rather, he’s deepening an already existing understanding. This antithetical style of rhetoric is meant as a call to his listeners to dig deeper into the underlying values behind these commandments, not to do away with them. It is an invitation to consider the core, motivating values behind the letter of the law.

Think with me for a moment about the very first illustration Jesus employs: “You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall not murder. 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; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Yikes. Jesus is taking this commandment and intensifying it to the extreme, hyperbolically. He’s cutting straight to the heart of the matter. Anger, judgment, insults, and name-calling are just as bad as murder, because they originate from the same place — thinking and wishing ill on a brother or sister. Bias, prejudice, hatred of the perceived other lead to violence against our neighbor, both in our hearts and physically.

Just because we don’t go as far as to commit murder does not mean that we haven’t already committed that sin of hatred in our hearts. Jesus is not getting rid of the commandment that you shall not murder and replacing it with something new — he’s getting right to the root of the prohibition. He’s deepening our understanding of what it means to value the life of another human being. By extension, this should be the fundamental moral and ethical value that guides how we relate to one another, even to the rest of creation.

The second thing about this passage that is so challenging is that Jesus both is and is not talking about anger, adultery, divorce, and swearing. By the way, divorce was a topic of concern because at the time if a husband divorced his wife she would have little or no means to support herself

in society, so it was harmful because it basically cast that person aside. So, on one hand, he is being literal in the sense that we don't have to commit an act to sin, but just the thoughts of hatred and lust for example are sins in our hearts. But at the same time, he's also speaking hyperbolically, exaggerating to an extreme to make a point using these four commandments as illustrations. It is a both and, meant to protect the marginalized of his day, but also a fundamental ethic of love of neighbor that can apply to our lives today.

Honestly, I think these commandments are illustrations meant to serve as a means to teaching something about a fundamental ethical end, to the very way we relate to each other and to God. They both are and they are not about policing behavior; more than that, they're about relationality. They are about moving us from some idea of 'at least I didn't do this bad thing' to look at and examine the condition of our hearts and minds that make us think about wronging others all the time. Jesus is urging us to think not only about the way we treat each other, but also about the way we think about other people and the way we tend to relationships. Anger, hatred, objectifying others, not caring about the well-being of another, not keeping our word, these are all obstacles to creating a loving, beloved community because they don't recognize other people as beloved children of God. When we do these things, we don't see other people as created in the image of God, as we all are. Jesus is, then, deepening our understanding of the Law by getting us to think about the fundamental values and truths behind how it is that should relate to other people.

In our own day and age, this realization is just as important. When we don't recognize our neighbor as created in the image of God, we harbor prejudice and hatred: against women, against people of color, against LGBTQ+ people, against differently abled folk, against other religions and worldviews, the list goes on. And these sins of the heart are real sin. We need to repent of these sins just as much as we need to repent of the actions that flow from these dispositions.

Finally, I believe, even though this part of the Sermon on the Mount seems to be focused on laws, it does in fact point

us to both the need and the promise of grace. If anything, this passage makes us uncomfortable to hear because we know we can't possibly keep these new, intensified commandments Jesus is giving. How could we keep ourselves from ever being angry or breaking a promise? We simply cannot. This passage convicts us all and leads us to the need for abundant grace. By Jesus' definition, we go around murdering in our hearts all day long. So as much as Jesus is pointing us toward a fundamental ethic of love and honor of other people, he's also showing us the truth that we can't possibly do this on our own. As much as we should and do aspire to this ideal, we cannot meet these high expectations. We mess up, we wish ill against people who wrong us, we hurt other people. In the words of the liturgy we use every Sunday, we confess that we sin against God and neighbor in thought, word, and deed, by what we do, and by what we leave undone. We do not love God with our whole heart, and we do not love our neighbor as ourselves. We are sinners in need of God' vast grace and mercy, not because we divorce or swear, not because we don't keep our New Year's Resolution or Lenten discipline, but because we do not love God with all our heart and mind and strength and because we do not love our neighbor as ourselves. That is why we come to this place, week in and week out, for pardon, for healing, and for strength.

That is also why we need a God who knows what it is like to be human. God in Jesus Christ knows what it is like to be hated, betrayed, mocked, hung on a cross. God in Christ knows firsthand the consequences of our human sinfulness, and yet, AND YET, offers us only forgiveness, mercy, and love. God in Christ calls us to honor the image of the Divine in each and every person. God in Christ calls us to care for creation, to work for justice and peace, and to hasten the coming of the kingdom.

Because of this, these "intensified" commandments Jesus gives us are not a checklist of morality or some baseline of decency. They are a call to full and abundant life. These commandments are not intended to be hurdles or stumbling blocks, and certainly not more words we use to judge each other and ourselves. These teachings are meant to set us on a path toward wholeness. They convict us, they remind us

of our need for God's mercy and forgiveness, and in the person of Jesus Christ, we are assured of that grace — God's love, freely given.

So, as you go out into the world this week, into your day to day lives, keep wrestling with Jesus' dramatic teachings we heard this morning. What might they mean for your own life and discipleship, how might they challenge you to consider your own core values and ethics, and why might they matter for us as beloved community? If nothing else, remember to see and honor the image of God in everyone you encounter. Let that be your ethical touchstone. Tend to the condition of your minds and hearts, which is just as important as the things you say and do. And above all, cling to the very Good News that God in Christ is love, mercy, and abundant life.

May the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, and may the love of Christ dwell in you richly, dear Church. Amen.

