



“Relationships 101”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-32

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The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Our Lectionary Gospel reading from Matthew...is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount.

But with Valentine’s Day coming tomorrow...I was a bit surprised to see the main topics of the reading for today: anger, insult and lust...unquestionably three of the greatest relationship killers of all time. We also hear about adultery and divorce. And so maybe this wouldn’t be the best time to wish everyone a Happy Valentine’s Day.

Today we do continue our journey through the Sermon on the Mount. We began several weeks ago with the wonderful blessings of the Beatitudes...and then moved into the uplifting exhortation for us to be a light to the world around us.

These were lofty and moving passages...that depict the way things are supposed to be in God’s Kingdom...or what Matthew calls the Kingdom of Heaven...a place where we are in right relationship with each other...and with God.

This notion of the Kingdom of God...as David has said the past couple of weeks...it is an underlying theme throughout the Sermon on the Mount....and so it is today as well.

But in today’s reading...Jesus dramatically shifts gears. He brings us very much down to earth...into the dirt...apparently not afraid to get his hands dirty....digging into the nitty gritty of human relationships.

In contrast to the lofty goals of inheriting the Kingdom...and being a beacon of light...in today’s text we are confronted with some of humanity’s worst behaviors...behaviors that can indeed kill relationships.

This text is centered on the importance of the law in ancient Israel...and at their core...laws are about managing human relationships.

In this passage, Jesus is talking about two specific laws that you probably recognize as being from the Ten Commandments: You shall not murder...and you shall not commit adultery.

This is part of a block in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus addresses various laws. He does so with a repetitive formula...first identifying a specific law....and then providing his own perspective.

And in this repetitive way of addressing these laws, Jesus is making a simple point about laws in general. He rejects the notion that it is sufficient to merely follow the letter of the law. No, he is saying that we must instead follow the spirit of the law.

Or as one of the commentaries I read puts it: we are to obey the law “from the inside out.” The point is that we are to emphasize our own self-monitoring so as to never get to the point where we brush up against the law.

It's a simple point...really common sense...but we can't hear it enough...every day, the newspaper is full of examples of how this common sense ideal is broken.

In our passage, Jesus introduces the first of these laws saying: "You have heard it said that you shall not murder." And then he adds: "But I say to you that if you are angry with your brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

He's saying that simply avoiding murder is not the right way to approach the law...and that makes sense of course. But then he starts to raise the bar significantly...he says that we aren't even supposed to get angry.

Now I don't know about you but that bar seems really high to me.

And then...to emphasize his point...Jesus makes a statement that must have been shocking in a society where worship was so central to life. He effectively says that reconciliation of disputes with antagonists...that this is actually more important than worship.

Even if you are in the middle of worship...you are supposed to drop what you are doing and go reconcile the problem. The text says you are "to leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." I hope I'm not giving anyone any ideas about jumping up in the middle of the sermon.

Then Jesus turns to the commandment on adultery...saying, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Again...I've got to say...that's quite a high bar. And then...he raises the bar even higher...saying that, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out."

Now OK...I've got to admit...this isn't sounding too promising. Is this really what the Kingdom of God is about? This really doesn't sound too realistic.

First...on that anger thing...I've yet to meet anyone who says they never get angry. And on that lust thing...I'm simply going to refer you to Jimmy Carter...circa 1976.

And so this does bring up a serious question about our text: Does God...does Christ...really expect us to eliminate these sorts of feelings? Are we really expected to be so perfect?

The answer...at least from my perspective is...of course not. I don't believe Christ has that kind of unrealistic expectation. After all...isn't the central idea of Christianity that God knows what it is like to be one of us...Christ was a living, breathing human...who even got angry from time to time.

And isn't another central premise of Christianity...the idea that we are all flawed...prone to sin. I think God understands that we could no more eliminate these kinds of feelings...than walk on water.

In fact...to take this passage in too literal a fashion...to assume that we should banish anger...banish lust...it feels like this is actually...like the "letter of the law" approach.

Further...by telling us to tear out our eyes and cut off our hands...this actually seems like a signal of the hyperbolic...and symbolic nature of Christ's statement. Self-mutilation was not part of Christ's ministry.

No...I think we are misinterpreting what Christ is saying if we take it too literally. He isn't saying that we need to be perfect. No...in painful detail...he's reminding us that we are not perfect...so that we can have a chance of moving in that direction.

But just because this isn't a literal warning...that doesn't mean it is not a serious warning.

Christ is making a stark warning about how underlying feelings can kill relationships. He's putting us on notice that these kinds of feelings can be the seeds of trouble...particularly if we allow those feelings to go untended to.

He is especially clear with regard to anger...that it can't be allowed to fester. He says that we are supposed to reconcile with our brothers and sisters ASAP. He is actually saying that reconciliation trumps everything...even worship. In other words...deal with your anger...don't ignore it.

And reconciliation...this doesn't seem to be just about hugging and making up...although that is certainly a good thing. What Christ is talking about is the hard work of resolving differences...finding common ground.

So this doesn't seem to be a prohibition on anger...or a prohibition on any kind of feeling. No, instead it's about shaping our character...shaping our character so we can have loving and productive relationships....by dealing with the kind of potentially destructive impulses that can build.

Christ is warning about anger...and lust...and after our passage he also warns about untruthfulness...and retaliation...also big relationship killers.

He is saying that these kinds of very tricky feelings and behaviors...if not carefully addressed...can lead to broken relationships...that we need to be aware of our propensity for such feelings...and how they can lead to relationship problems. Actually, this sounds to me...like the most basic idea in psychology: "Be in touch with your feelings." And who could better understand our psychology...how our minds work...who could better understand us than the one who created us?

Being in touch with our feelings...and reconciling before those feelings get out of control...this passage really is all about preserving our relationships.

And so with all this focus on preserving relationships, Christ must be trying to tell us something about the Kingdom of Heaven...which is, after all, an underlying theme in the Sermon on the Mount.

And to me...what he seems to be saying about the Kingdom is a little bit surprising. Christ is presenting God's Kingdom in a new light...one that reveals that God's Kingdom can have very down-to-earth implications.

Here...the Kingdom seems very real...a place where our relationships are the priority. And it's a place where God knows very well that we are far from perfect.

But, true to the fundamental idea of a place called the Kingdom of God...I don't think Christ is merely talking about our relationships with each other...he is also talking about our relationships with God...another relationship that needs tending to.

You see, our relationship with God is integrally related to our relationship with each other. Christ is presenting the Kingdom of Heaven...as a place where it is hard to have a satisfactory relationship with God...unless we are seeking to reconcile with our fellow humanity...to be in synch with our brothers and sisters.

In fact, I'd argue that this is very much like the Great Commandment. We can't separate loving God from loving our neighbor as ourselves. The very words of the Great Commandment say that we are supposed to love: ourselves...our neighbors...and God. It is a classic tripartite covenant.

After all, if you really want to show your love for God...maybe the best way to do this by loving God's creation...loving God's children. Wouldn't this make God so very happy? You parents...or grandparents...or aunts and uncles...really anyone responsible for the care of a child...you know this feeling very well.

I think Dietrich Bonhoeffer succinctly captures this idea with a simple statement. He said: "He who says he loves God and hates his brother..." Well, let's just say that Bonhoeffer accuses such a person of not telling the truth.

To put it in more positive terms...when we tend to our relationships...when we seek genuine brotherhood and sisterhood...doing the hard work of reconciliation...at home and out in the world...we bring ourselves closer to God.

So I guess the point is that...in the Kingdom...we can best walk with God...when we also walk with each other.

About 10 years ago...when Plymouth was in the beginnings of a transition...at the beginnings of transformative changes...the leadership of the church...convened a series of classes to talk about the Plymouth Covenant...that very same covenant we read at each baptism.

This was a time when our senior pastor had recently left...so it wasn't the smoothest of times for Plymouth. And our leadership was looking to our covenant as a way toward renewal.

The idea was to make the classes easily accessible for everyone...to do them multiple times...so that virtually everyone could participate in this dialogue. And the goal was to renew and remind everyone of the founding Congregational notion that we are all in covenant together...walking hand in hand with God...and with each other...whatever differences we might have...and there were a few.

This one sentence covenant, which is from 1629, speaks to the point I'm trying to make today.

"We covenant with the Lord and one with another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His blessed word of truth."

And so...we covenant with the Lord and with each other...we promise to walk with each other and with the Lord. The point is: to walk with God...it is incumbent on us to also try to walk with each other. This is an ideal that seems so deeply embedded in the wonderful sense of community we have here.

And the good news is that God knows that life in community isn't always easy...that relationships are challenging.

Yes...God knows that it can be hard. But God also knows that this spirit of reconciliation is an absolute necessity if we want our relationships to work...both on a personal level...and on a broader level.

Just imagine a world where we literally drop everything to go and reconcile with those with whom we are having problems. Just imagine if that kind of reconciliation was the priority for our society...including our politics. Just think of the spirit of compromise this would spawn.

We all have differences. The message from Christ is to help us avoid making them irreconcilable differences. I think it's a good message as we approach Valentines Day.

Christ is describing a world where we seek to walk hand in hand with each other...and with God. Now that sounds like heaven to me.

Amen.