

SERMON
“From the Heart”
Becky A. Hebert
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Matthew 5: 21-37

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder; and 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 council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times. ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord,’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the city of the great King. And do swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’: anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

SERMON

Today's scripture reading is the one that got Jimmy Carter in trouble. Remember he was so bold as to admit that he had committed adultery. Then he explained that he hadn't physically committed adultery, but he was guilty of lusting in his heart. And, of course, all of us church going folk know that to lust in your heart is the same as having committed adultery. Well, to say the least, the nation was shocked that a man, who made such a strong claim to being a Christian, could so openly admit his sinfulness.

Yes, this passage of scripture sure got President Carter in trouble, as it may well me today. So I ask for sympathy here...sympathy for the real challenge before me this day. It's sort of like asking for only those who are without sin to cast the first stones. For who among us has lived without anger, lust or deceit?

It would seem that Jesus is putting before us the impossible. Not that any of us would want to admit that we have entertained any of these in our hearts—but the reality is most of us have.

Now, top this off with Jesus' quaint saying that opens each of these seemingly impossible recommendations, "You have always been told...but now I say to you..." Most of us prefer to stick with the old wisdom over all this new fangled stuff. We don't come here for new wisdom; we've got our hands full just trying to live out what we already know. In fact, we just want to hear the ancient wisdom told again and again. Of course with new stories and illustrations, but none of this, "You've always been told ...but let me now tell you an even greater truth."

Then preacher Jesus continues with his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. He began his sermon with a whole list of human weaknesses and vulnerabilities: grief, meekness, poverty, peace makers, and seekers. He blesses those for whom life is often a curse. In the

beloved beatitudes we cherish, Jesus offers up blessings for us when we need them the most. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I don’t know about you, but when my spirit is down in the dumps Jesus’ blessing is a comfort. For I know it to be true. When I’ve been at my lowest, Jesus blesses me with a sojourn into the kingdom. Do you know what I mean? Have you ever been there, facing poverty or grief—and had God brush away your tears. Oh, how we love hearing these messages in the gospel!

Then Jesus switches from these beautiful blessings to a series of directly opposite sayings; a set of sayings he frames with, “You have heard it said of old . . . but I say to you.”

He follows the Beatitudes with his dissertation on the law. It would seem at this point in his sermon that he’s using the second half of the Ten Commandments as the text from which he’s preaching. This half of the commandments deals with human interactions. He takes commandments that too many already have trouble keeping and stretches them into a realm that seems beyond our reach.

“You have to hear it said that you shall not commit murder,. . . but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother, shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, “You foul,” shall guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.” Wow!

I confess. I’m guilty. I do not know how many time I’ve said “that news commentator, politician, commentator is a fool!”

Then Jesus says, as the offering plate is being passed on Sundays, and you are ready to drop your weekly offering of a \$100 into the plate, and you suddenly remember someone who is holding something against you—then get up, leave your envelope with your \$100 check on the pew, and go make peace with your neighbor, settle the dispute and then come back and drop your offering in the plate.

The image is downright humorous. Can you see it? Everyone bouncing up, leaving church and rushing out and coming back and having to put their offering in the plates that are on the offering table by now.

And then preacher Jesus makes that outrageous statement that even good hearted Jimmy Carter could not keep. “You heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I say to you, that anyone who looks at a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery.”

Please note! Jesus does not offer up condemnation for us women. For us, women have certainly never looked at a man with lust in our hearts. Only you men, it would seem, do this. Really, my hunch is that Jesus intended this, as well as all his sermons to be inclusive.

I’ve been told that this section of the Sermon on the Mount presented us with impossible commandments to keep. I think it was a seminary professor who once told me that Jesus was trying to point out how impossible it was not to sin. Many say that Jesus told us these things knowing there was no way we could do any of this. Jesus, it seems, uses this part of his sermon to make the point of what miserable, weak sinners we all are, in order to humble us and rip out our holier-than-thou righteousness and lift us out of our judgmental nature into becoming more accepting of the less than perfect ways of others.

This is an interesting and helpful interpretation. It might even be right, but let me put before you another to consider. For me, this interpretation makes Jesus sound like some domineering, demandingly strict parent we just want to rebel against instead of the man who wanted to teach us how to be in union with him. You have heard it said that it is impossible to live up to Jesus’ teachings, but I say to you, it is not. Our interior work, our heart work , makes it possible.

Cynthia Bourgeault suggests the “heart” as used in the wisdom tradition is not the seat of human emotion. The **heart is an organ of spiritual perception—the primary instrument of sight, or insight.** “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” (Mt. 5: 8)

The purpose of this place within all of us navigates to keep us in alignment with our origin, our source of being, the mysterious “root” of one’s true nature—in order to reunite everything to the foundation that undergirds us all. It’s purpose is to intertwine our heart with the heart of Christ--so that, our lives are always flowing within that greater life. It is about two becoming one. It is about purifying the heart...while lust, hatred, controversy, criticism, and falsely swearing...contaminate the heart. A heart in lust is in “two-ness” and sabotages us.¹ You see, Jesus was not into laying down shoulds, oughts, should nots and ought nots. He was into showing us the path to our true self; wholeness, liberation and fullness of life. And this path, so he says, comes through purity of heart.

Thus being Valentine’s weekend, it seems appropriate to look at the work of the heart—of two becoming one. For it may be erotic love (remember sympathy), that most opens us to the possibility of two becoming one.

Let’s skip ahead to Matthew 19: 3-20. The dialogue begins, as so many of Jesus’ teachings do, with a challenging, test question from the Pharisees. They want to know if a man is allowed to divorce his wife, and Jesus responds with that statement often made at marriage ceremonies, about us leaving our parents and joining with another that two shall become one. Jesus lifts up erotic love –the love that leads to marriage, as a love at the core of mystical union.

From there, Pharisees plow forward; “Then why did Moses command us to write a bill of dismissal in order to divorce?” Jesus responded, “Moses knew your stubborn hearts, so he

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: discovering the Woman at the heart of Christianity*, pp.51-52.

allowed you to divorce your wives, but it was not so in the beginning. Therefore, I say to you: whoever divorces his wife [unless for infidelity] and marries another commits adultery.” (Mt. 19: 9)

“Moses knew your stubborn hearts.” Moses knew that his people could not live up to the demands of marriage if their hearts were hardened. And hardening of the heart, the organ of spiritual perception—the primary instrument of sight, or insight, could leave one practically blind. A hardened heart, a contaminated heart, a restricted heart, is one unable to hear; to align. It cannot intertwine with another human—much less Christ. A person may be unable but this does make it impossible. We’ve only to soften and purify our hearts. It is the missing ingredient that makes Jesus’ path comprehensible and doable. It is the journey to oneness from which abundance cascades and power is greater than constrictions. It is the life Jesus so wanted and wants us to have. Amen.