

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year A
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
I Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

We are still squarely in **chapter 5 of Matthew** with **Jesus** taking us ever deeper into the **Sermon on the Mount, the heart of Jesus' ethical teaching.**

Buckle in, he's going to take us for a ride.

Jesus said, "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 the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

The old "*you have heard it said...but I say to you.*" Whenever you hear that, know that **Jesus** is calling us to a **higher standard** than what the **law** prescribes. This is that "**your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees**" that we heard about last week.

But **this passage** is even *more* interesting. **Jesus** starts off by talking about the **prohibition against murder** and that **one who murders** shall be **liable to judgment**, but he then takes it into the nitty gritty of our relationships and all the other ways that we are **killing** one another.

And there is a **subtle thing** going on here that we miss in the **English** translation. We hear this: **angry with a brother or sister=liable to judgment; insult a brother or sister=liable to the council; calling another a fool=liable to the hell of fire.** Whoa, that's rather a leap. Somehow, we jumped from **judgment** and **being accountable to the council to the hell of fire.**

But in the **Greek**, there is a **progression**, and it goes like this: *everyone* who is **angry** with his **brother** or **sister** shall be **guilty before the court.** That "*before the court*" is the word **κρίσις** (kreses), the root that gives us "**crisis**," and this word means "**a separating, a sundering, a separation.**" To be **guilty before this court** is to be **accountable** for the way our **anger separates us, splits us apart**, both in **our own being** and in **our relationships.** And the **κρίσις** was actually a **tribunal of seven judges that sat in several cities in Palestine—kind of regional courts.**

Next, **Jesus** says that **whoever** says to his **brother** or **sister**, **ῥακά** (raca), hmmm, *them's fighting words.* To call someone **ῥακά** was to throw down some **Aramaic** and call them **empty**, call them a **senseless, empty-headed man**, like **worthless**; it was a term of **utter vilification** and a term of **utter reproach** in **Jesus' time.** **Calling a brother or sister ῥακά** made you **liable, accountable to, the Sanhedrin.** That's the **great council** that was **seated in Jerusalem**; that's like the **Supreme Court.**

Then, **Jesus** says that **whoever says you fool, μωρός** (moros), which gives us the word "**moron**" in **English**, shall be **liable to the hell of fire—this isn't quite hell** like we think of it, but **γέεννα** (**Gehenna**), originally the **valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem**, where the **filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned**; it was as awful a place as they could imagine.

So, we have a **progression from anger with a brother or sister to calling a brother or sister empty-headed to forgetting the other is a brother or sister at all and simply reducing them to a moron, all with increasingly severe consequences. And why the most severe consequence for the last epithet? Because at that point, we have completely dehumanized another human being and reduced them to a caricature.**

Jesus is trying to show us how **the words we use take us down a slippery slope** and how, while *we may not physically murder someone*, we have just assassinated their character and human dignity, if we can't get ahold of ourselves. **Anger not held to account leads us to resentment, and resentment that seethes, always takes us to a destructive place that stinks and smolders and rots.**

The other three paragraphs in today's gospel are taking us down a *similar* path. **"You have heard it said...but I say to you."** **"You've heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you, you've got to examine your heart. Oh, you hold to the letter of the law, but you can go so bad wrong in your heart, and frankly, it's better to lose an eye or a hand than to violate your deepest values."** Jesus is clear, **"You do that and you are going to experience yourself at war with yourself, and then you won't have cut out your eye or cut off your hand, but you will have cut yourself off from your very own conscience, distanced yourself from your very own heart, closed your mind to my mind, to the mind of Christ. And do that for a long period of time, and a piece of you dies, and you're back in Gehenna."** We're not meant to split off parts of ourselves; we just don't do well under those circumstances; we're meant to live in alignment with our values that honor ourselves, the dignity of others, and the holiness of sacred covenant.

Moving right along, Jesus then **challenges the ease with which divorce certificates were given**, kind of a **no-guilt, carefree approach to marriage and divorce**. Jesus does give *circumstances under which divorce could occur in his day*, but he is very concerned about what divorce did to people, *particularly to women who had no power and no way to support themselves in that society*. And anyone who has been through divorce *knows* that there is **no such thing as a no-guilt, carefree divorce**. The severing of such an intimate relationship is *always costly, sometimes necessary*, but *always so very costly*. Jesus doesn't use the fiery hell image; he only calls our attention to what it does to *both* parties.

And finally, Jesus takes on the whole deal around the **promises we make**. **"You have heard that it was said, '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...or by the earth...or by Jerusalem. And do not 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."**

In other words, Jesus is saying, **"Don't get all dramatic with your promises; just let your word be "yes" or "no"—don't rationalize it; don't explain it; don't hedge it; don't feel guilty about; don't apologize for it; simply own your decisions, and live into them, period."** When you are asked to do something, anybody else struggle with simply saying "yes" or "no" without launching into a dissertation about why? Anybody else have a little voice that whispers, "Oh, how could you?" or "How could you not?" This counsel of Jesus to let our "yes" or "no" stand is the way to freedom, truly.

These teachings of Jesus are hard! This is the solid food that Paul knows we have to work up to from the milk, but *it's where we need to get to if we are to live as the body of Christ in the world. These choices are difficult. It's easier to live according to the letter of the law and avoid these more demanding ethical places*. Our brains are good, and most of us can rationalize our way out of anything; I know I can.

But **Jesus** is pushing us to the **more costly ethic** that is **always rooted in and ruled by love**, the kind of love that is willing to be crucified in order to taste a **deeper, richer, resurrection life**.

These are the **kinds of choices** that **Moses *knew*** would stand before the people of God *always*—the **commandments of God that are never divorced from love**, and the **temptation, *always***, for our hearts to turn away and chase after other gods *and* the **ruinous consequences** that reverberate when we do so.

As way back then, *so too now*, God has set before us life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you, and that's what allows us to live in the land of abundant life that God gave to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob and that Jesus promises to all who follow him.

So, check in with yourself today.

Where are you with regard to your **anger**? Are you **sliding down the slippery slope** toward **insult** and **losing touch altogether** with the **humanity of another**?

How are you living in alignment with your **deepest values**? Is there any place where you are **compartmentalizing your life** because your thoughts and actions, your words and deeds are **violating your values** and **out of sync** with the **mind of Christ** that lives within you, **out of sync** with your heart?

Are you dismissing the toll of your choices in relationships and **honoring the human cost** that is *always* in play?

Are you abdicating your decisions, hedging your choices, all the while never claiming your Godgiven power and authority?

I'll admit, this is **not an easy inventory to take**; it would be crushing were it not for the fact that **Jesus is going to feed us with his very own self**. *Even* when we are **struggling with the demands of this way of life**, he feeds us and changes us, at the **cellular level, from the inside out**. Week by week, we **come here and hear his teaching**, we **confess where we mess up**, *he* dusts us off, feeds us, lifts our heads, and sends us out, *again*, to do the work he has given us to do and to confront, *all over again*, the choices that face us daily. Those choices for life and those choices for death, *they will be waiting for us* as soon as we step outside those doors.

Let **Jesus** keep **whispering** in your ear, *"I know you've heard it said...but I say to you..."* We all know the way to Gehenna; let **Jesus** show you the way to life. Amen.

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