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

Today, we get the roadmap. **Moses** lays it out before us so clearly**—"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."**

Easy-peasy. Just got to **love God**, **walk in God's ways**, and **observe God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances**. ***Do it right, life and blessings are yours; do it wrong, death and curses.*** Got it? **Quid pro quo**. Quite a **transactional** view of our relationship with the Divine.

And there are two problems with this view.

First, you can "do it right" and *still have it go all so wrong*. Talk to anybody who has ever suffered at the hands of something beyond their power about how quid pro quo works for their soul. Ask the people of Turkey and Syria how such a theology is working for them this week—it isn't, and it doesn't. Such profound suffering can in no way be explained as "they deserved it because they fell short of the mark." And even the bible itself critiques such a simplistic and transactional view of God—see the **Book of Job**.

The **second problem** with this view is tricky. **You can "do it all right" and *still do it wrong*.** Religious folks, especially **disciplined** and **rule-following** religious folk, are especially prone to this. **Paul** is getting at this when he talks about **"behaving according to human inclinations."**

Paul sees that even **followers of Jesus** who really want to walk in the way can still fall prey to **jealousy** and **quarrels** and **claims over status**—like who's really got the *best* way to walk in the way? **Apollos, Paul,** the Episcopal Church? Yes, our **human inclination** can slide right over into **pride** and leave our **false self** feeling quite **proud** and still firmly **in control**.

And **Jesus** takes this a whole step deeper--**you can follow the letter of the law and still very much violate the heart of it**. This is what he's tackling in the section of the **Sermon on the Mount** that we hear today. **"You have heard it said…*but I say to you*."** Oh, this is brutal.

"Yeah, you've heard it said, 'You shall not murder'…*but I say to you* that anger, insults, calling someone a fool *kill another person's dignity*." And then, **Jesus** takes it one step more: **"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."** This isn't just about scanning our minds and hearts for **wrongs done unto us** that need to be healed; this is about doing the kind of

self-examination that looks for what **wrongs we might have done unto others** and seeking them out to make it right.

"You've heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery'…*but what is going on at the level of your mind and your heart? Are you crossing boundaries there? And what about how you look at another? In your mind's eye, do you strip them of their innate human dignity and see them as an object that is yours to possess? You may not have crossed that physical line in the sand, but I am telling you, you still may be adding to the pain that inevitably comes when the sacredness of human beings and their committed relationships are not honored."*

"And yes, the law lays out a simple path to divorce…*but I say to you that, unless you have good cause, you're putting your partner in an untenable position."* Remember, in Jesus' day, marriage and divorce was much more about property rights and left the woman in such a vulnerable position. **Jesus** is challenging the "wife as easily disposable property" view of divorce. *Human beings are never property to be easily disposed of.* And anyone who has ever been through divorce knows that it is never easy and always has ripple effects that go far and wide and deep.

It still may be a path that needs to be taken, but any notion that divorce is a carefree easy path doesn't honor the sacrifice involved whenever a relationship has to make the Holy Week journey through Good Friday and the cross and the waiting in the tomb, and only then, to find the love and life that flow again on the other side of the tomb. Sometimes, **choosing life** also involves **choosing the death of something in our lives**, but we must always know that there is **no skipping over the journey of Holy Week** and **letting something die well** if we are **to find the life we seek**.

"And, you've heard it said 'You shall not swear falsely but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord'…but I say to you don't swear at all, not by heaven, not by earth, not by Jerusalem, not by your head. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Oh man, so many of us want to explain ourselves, kind of hedge our bets. I'm a six on the enneagram, I love to defend my decisions, especially if I can pull in external authority or two. It's so hard to simply let my **"Yes"** stand; even harder to let my **"No"** stand. But anything else muddies the water and can leave another wondering where they stand at all. Jesus is saying, ***"Don't go lining up your defenses; a 'Yes' or 'No' that rises up from the wellspring of Life that lives within us is enough."***

In all these areas, **Jesus is taking us far beyond the dictates of the law, far beyond the surface meaning *straight down into the depths of what is at work in the heart***, which is the place where all of our motivations and intentions and inclinations are born. **Jesus is asking us to do the necessary work *there*.**

And truth be told, **Moses** knew this as well. He continues in that passage from **Deuteronomy 30: But if your *heart* turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.** There will always be other gods calling out to us, other forces that can lead us astray, all kinds of choices presented to our heart, all

kinds of opportunities for our heart to turn away. ***"Follow these," Moses says, "and you won't be living in the promised land for long."***

That's why **Moses** reminds us from the get-go, **it's *not* just about observing commandments, decrees, and ordinances, but it begins with LOVING GOD, and that is always a matter of the heart.** ***On this, Moses and Jesus absolutely agree***.

The **path that leads to life** will always involve **checking in with our hearts** again and again and again.

- Are they in alignment with God's love and God's ways OR is it all performative adherence to the externals?
- Do we use our religion to shore up our false self, to mask our **human inclinations** that secretly like being just a little bit better than the next guy, OR do we allow all these ways to live that we are given by God and taught by Jesus guide our hearts back to true north as we seek to follow the path of love?
- As you think about your life, where is that place **where Jesus is saying to you, "You have heard it said…*but I say to you*…?"** Where is he challenging us to go ***beyond*** **the dictates of our faith and tradition *to* practice a deeper way of love**?

We can **stay on the surface**; we can **do it all right**, but today, Moses and Jesus remind us that **DOING IT RIGHT is *not* the same thing as CHOOSING LIFE**. Today, the crossroads is before us—**commit to do the hard work of the heart, calibrating always to the way and love of God, and know the preciousness of choosing life OR let your heart drift knowing it won't be long until it's led astray**. Walk long on that path, and you'll discover how **even the promised land can feel dead**.

Death, this isn't what God wants for us. Not by a long shot. This day, **CHOOSE LIFE and LOVE and ALL THE WORK that comes with it**; it isn't easy-peasy, *but matters of the heart rarely are*. Amen.

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