

“Heart is Where the Home Is”
Rev. Eric. S. Corbin
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
February 12, 2017

Matthew 5:21-37

It's that time of year when we go out to purchase Valentine's Day cards for our children to hand out at school. I remember one year, our oldest daughter Faith picked out Tinker Bell-themed cards which carried messages such as "Valentine, You can Count on Me!" and "Fairy Friends Forever!" I'm glad that most kids' Valentine's cards aren't too racy. Faith's cards didn't even feature the main symbol we see so much of at Valentine's Day – hearts. Pretty much everywhere else, though, you'll see hearts galore right now. These stylized symbols of love are plastered on billboards, balloons, teddy bears, cards, commercials – you name it, you'll find a heart on it right about now. And it seems quite appropriate, because the heart is what Jesus is focusing on in our Gospel text for today, though definitely not in the commercialized Valentine's Day way.

Jesus took the familiar laws and gave them his own interpretation. Four times in the text we read today – and two more in next week's text – Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said...but I say...” He takes the law that is firmly planted in the minds of the people, and shows them how it really should be firmly rooted in their hearts. We sometimes think that Jesus relaxed the rules, but He tells those gathered for that famous Sermon on the Mount that the laws they have are *good* as far as they go, but really they don't go *nearly far enough*.

Jesus starts with the commandment “You shall not murder.” Seems like a good rule to have. People can't just go around murdering people. But such a rule gives us a false sense of accomplishment. “*Hey, I haven't killed anyone today! Must be doing alright!*” Jesus says that's just the *start* of it. I haven't murdered anyone today, but maybe I've held anger in my heart toward someone. Just like that, Jesus takes a law that is in the head, and applies it to the heart. Maybe when someone upset me, I said harsh words to them in my anger. I didn't actually harm them

physically, but maybe I really wanted to. Jesus says, “You’re guilty.” He says that even *insulting* someone bears serious consequences. Note that Jesus doesn’t even say something like “Don’t insult someone because that *might lead* to more anger and then maybe even murder.” No, the insult is bad enough in itself. It is a demeaning of your neighbor. It is treating the person as less than human.

The law is “don’t murder” and Jesus says I’m guilty just for *insulting* someone – and that’s just the *first* example today. How am I to possibly keep up with such rules? I think I can make it through this life without murdering someone, but to not even insult someone? Come on, Jesus, that’s impossible. If you are going to up the ante on the law, I’m going to need a full list of all of these rules, so I can do my best not to break them.

But that’s the problem with us. We’re too focused on the rules. What is the *least* I have to do to *not* break the rule? It’s a way of thinking that encourages us to give far less than our best, but Jesus is calling us to our best, encouraging us to live with our hearts in the right place, rather than just to meet the minimum requirements of the law.

Jesus tells us that we shouldn’t even bother giving our gifts to God while there is something between us and our brother or sister. Then, He says that being faithful to my spouse includes not looking at someone with lust. And divorce is out of the question. Even swearing an oath is a no-no. He just keeps making it tougher, doesn’t he? These new rules are harder and harder to follow, Jesus, can’t we stick with the old rules? I think I can follow the old rules better. But it’s not about meeting the bare minimum. It’s about having a heart oriented toward love. It’s about being guided by the Holy Spirit in *all* things.

I’ve mentioned once before a form of ethics known as “Virtue Ethics.” Virtue Ethics is one way of understanding why we do right and wrong. In this understanding, “good and right are grounded in our nature as human beings as created by God.”¹ In other words, ethical behavior is *not* a matter of simply following the rules. Ethical behavior is how we live *every* moment of our

¹ From notes – 8/29/2006 – Intro to Christian Ethics, MTS, Dr. Peter Gathje

lives, rather than comparing behaviors with a checklist of right and wrong. As one pastor put it, “Virtuous people will do the right thing simply because they are good and they have no need of a list of rules. So rather than learning the rules, we need to cultivate virtue. The Christian life is not a list of do’s and don’ts – it is about a transformation in your heart.”²

In his letter to the Romans, Paul talked about this. I love the way *The Message* paraphrase puts Romans 2:14-15: “When outsiders who have never heard of God’s law follow it more or less by instinct, they confirm its truth by their obedience. They show that God’s law is not something alien, imposed on us from without, but woven into the very fabric of our creation. There is something deep within them that echoes God’s yes and no, right and wrong.”

It’s not about the rules. It’s about having the heart of God.

Rather than focusing on memorizing the rules in our heads, we should focus our hearts on being the people God created us to be. In so doing, we will do the right thing. We will not only not murder, we will not insult our fellow children of God. We will not lust after another person because we realize that doing so reduces them to objects for our satisfaction, rather than honoring them as persons created in the image of God. We will tell the truth at *all* times, rather than just when we have sworn an oath to do so. We will do what is right, because what is right is written on our hearts. And Jesus says that to do so, we may have to cut things out of our lives. Plucking out eyes and cutting off limbs is most likely hyperbole, but we may have to remove some things that we’d rather not get rid of, that we may not think we can live without.

But what about that other tricky issue in the text today? What about the harsh words Jesus said about divorce and re-marriage? First, it is important to understand marriage in Jesus’ first-century context. The Biblical scholar Thomas Long says that divorce in that world was closer to what we would call “abandonment” today. Jesus refers back to Deuteronomy 24:1 in saying that a man should give his wife a “certificate of divorce.” This was actually an upgrade from earlier tradition. Previously, a man could divorce his wife by simply saying “I divorce you.” That was it.

² Martin Hilliard, from PRCL-L mailing list, 2/8/11

With those three words, he could abandon his wife and his commitment to her. And it was abandonment. She was then on her own in a world in which women had very few options. How was she to support herself? Where was she to live? What now? The law referenced in Deuteronomy says that the man now has to prepare and get legally affirmed a certificate of divorce. This ensured that the woman was not divorced just on the spur of the moment – there at least had to be some intentionality to it. And then, the certificate showed that she no longer had any marital obligations to him. She could legally remarry – which she likely would have to do in order to survive. This certificate was for her protection. And Jesus said that such a law – even though it *was* progressive for its day – doesn't go far enough to protect the woman. Jesus said that, as long as she remains faithful to her husband, then he had no cause to abandon her. In an entirely male-ruled world, Jesus once again takes the law and expands it – this time, to further protect women. This is what is at the heart of Jesus' words.

What does this say to us today? Am I suggesting that divorce was a bad thing then, but is a perfectly *great* thing now? No – divorce is always a painful thing. It is the end of the hopes and dreams that two people – and generally their families – brought into the marriage. Marriage is intended to be a reflection of the faithfulness of God. As Thomas Long says, "It is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for persons." However, that ideal is sometimes not met. The intended purposes of marriage can become lost. Marriages can become, instead of places of safety and honor, places of physical or mental danger. Marriages can become the opposite of what they are intended to be. Divorce is never a *good* thing, but it sometimes is the *best* thing possible in the situation. It is not to be considered lightly and married persons *should* strive to work together for a loving marriage that does reflect God's faithfulness and love. But the reality of human life is that such is not always possible.

An Episcopal Bishop writes, "I once recommended an abused wife get a counselor, a lawyer and a divorce. I knew he was hitting her, and the kids too. She wasn't going to leave. I worried something really bad would happen. She was shocked: 'Shouldn't you be standing up for

marriage?"³ But, standing up for *marriage* should not come before standing up for *people*. We have to get to the heart of the matter. Do we look only at the rule, or do we look at the intention behind the rule?

The rules are *not* what is important. Successfully completing a checklist will not elicit joy from heaven. You're all in church this morning – check. I'm guessing none of you have murdered anyone today – check. You likely have not committed adultery this morning – check. Some of you probably tithed today – check. Many of you will say grace before lunch today – check. But, with Jesus, the checklist just keeps growing and growing. Refraining from murder is not enough – you must refrain from angry insults. Refraining from adultery is not enough – you must refrain from lustful looks. Telling the truth when under oath is not enough – you must tell the truth at all times. The checklist grows and grows, and we can *never* put checkmarks in all of the boxes. So, *stop trying*. Stop focusing on the checkmarks. Stop trying to meet the minimum requirement of the rules, and instead strive for the life that God wants for you. Live a life that honors your creator God *and* the others God has created around you. Seek to have God's spirit in your heart and not just in your head.

Life lived with God's spirit in our hearts is not a legalistic life. Many people think they want a life of rules because it seems easier – at least you know what *not* to do. But Jesus expands the rules to what we *should* do, and we can never meet His standard. So, what are we to do? Instead of trying in vain to live up to all the rules, try instead to live with a heart attuned to God's love. In doing so, you'll often find that you are doing what is right without even trying. Remember that you are saved not by what you do or don't do, but by God's grace. God's grace is not an excuse to ignore all the rules. Paul writes in the first two verse of Romans 6: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" We instead strive to live a life pleasing to God, all the while knowing that we rest in the protection of the love of God. Grace means that when we fall down, we fall into the

³ <http://bishopmike.com/2011/02/06/2132011-is-epiphany-6a/>

arms of a loving God, who grants us peace and hope and forgiveness and the strength to get up and try again.

So, what might be on the Valentine's Day card that God gives each of us this week? Maybe that Tinker Bell card was right all along – “Valentine, You can Count on Me!” Indeed, we can. We can count on God to love us even when we cannot check all the boxes on the checklist, though we strive to live a life pleasing to God. We can count on God to catch us when we fall, and to encourage us, in love, to live more and more the life that He intended for us. “Valentine, You can Count on Me!” Amen