

## Sermon for February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014

### Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Matthew 5:21-37

BLESSINGS TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER, OUR  
LORD JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Tuesday afternoon I was **sitting** in the work room, **eating** my lunch, **reading** over all the lessons for this Sunday. After reading the **gospel** lesson for about the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> time I thought—and I **even** wrote this down on the paper I had printed out—“*Am I in trouble here.*” The **reason** I wrote that down is that:

1. Even though I have **not** killed anyone; as recently as Christmas I was **angry** with my sister for something she had done. My **youngest** son had to listen to me rant and rave about it.

2. I am **not** here to confess to you that I have committed adultery but in the past I have looked at a man that was **not** my husband and thought he was **rather** nice looking-lust????

3. I **have** been divorced.

4. Concerning oaths—I am **generally** what I would like to think of as an honest person but there **was** a time in my life when I was **not** beyond crossing my fingers when my parents asked me a question or when a friend wanted an answer from me that was **very** important and they said, “*cross your heart hope to die, or*

*do you swear on a stack of bibles?”* (Of course back then having your fingers crossed meant **any** lie that you said was automatically not a lie.)

5. I have and still once in a while **do** swear now and then.

I would **venture** to say as far as **this** gospel lesson is concerned: most of us are in trouble here in **one** way or another.

So **there** I was, **in** the work room, **reading** this gospel lesson wondering, *“should I preach on the first or second readings instead?”* They would have been easier for me to preach on. But taking the **easy way out** is **not** what God calls us to do. We are called to **push through** that which challenges us to become **better** people. We are called to **wrestle with these texts** which call us to remember our **sinful** selves and become **better** Christians for it. This text may **seem** like bad news to **many** people as we **might** see it as a list of divine rules and moral peaks that are **hard** for any of us to live up to. Let’s try to hear the text from a different point of view and a different way of being.

The gospel reading for this week is a **continuation** of the Sermon on the Mount which we began last week. If you remember this is where Jesus was teaching his disciples by telling them that he had **not come** to abolish the Law or the Prophets but he had come to fulfill them. **Four** times in our reading for today we heard Jesus say, *“You have heard that it was said (or some version of that)”* which was followed **closely** by, *“But I say to you.”* Jesus was trying to get his

disciples (and us) to see that he was moving **beyond the letter of the Law** to move into the **realm of the Spirit of the Law**. What Jesus is teaching about is 3 of the 10 commandments. They are: *5: You shall not kill. 6. You shall not commit adultery. And 8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

The **first** subject that Jesus addresses is anger. The Old Testament Law that he quotes prohibits the killing of another person. The point **Jesus** is making is the **heart of the issue** is killing someone is much more than taking the life of another human being. It begins with an attitude that *disregards the worthiness of the other person, making his or her life unimportant*.

Likewise anger disregards their value. It is important for us to recognize that Jesus was **not speaking of natural angry** reactions that we **all** have when our sense of space and worth is violated. Even Jesus **himself** would get angry now and then. What Jesus was talking about was accepting, nurturing, and continuing the anger against another person after our **initial response** to their actions. The **lack of forgiveness** that comes as we hold onto our anger. When we **value** others as much as we **value** ourselves we will find explanations for their **intruding** into our space in the same way we find explanations for our **own** behavior when we hurt other people.

With the issue of **adultery** Jesus moves to the **heart of the purpose** for the Old Testament commandment. In Jesus' time all a man would have to do to

divorce his wife was to say to her **3** times, “*I divorce you.*” And it would be so. A man could divorce his wife for something as simple as being a bad cook or if he found another woman he liked the looks of better than his wife. Adultery at that time was understood to be much more than the violation of another man’s **property rights** over his wife because women were viewed as property. Jesus was pointing out that in **marriage** the **ultimate sin** was the lack of mutual sharing and giving of self to the other. **Marriage** was meant to be a **covenant** relationship much like the relationship between **God and Israel**. It was to be a relationship **filled** with love, fidelity, and valuing. For Jesus adultery was a violation of all 3 of these relational values. As for **divorce** Jesus made adultery an issue for which **both men and women** were responsible.

In the biblical context **oaths** referred to the use of **God’s** name to affirm the **truthfulness** of what one had said. In Jesus’ time there was a pattern of deceitfulness that prevailed. Some people felt free **NOT** to tell the truth **unless** they swore by **God’s** name. Yes means Yes and No means No. **No** other oaths should be necessary to **convince** others of the **integrity** of our words. As we enter into a relationship with God there should **never** be a question of our integrity.

What do all these **laws and judgments** mean for us today? How can we **apply** them into ways we Christians live out our lives as people of God? If we **look deep** into what Jesus was teaching his disciples down into the **Spirit** of these

laws which goes **beyond** the black and white of them: it all boils down to relationship. Our **relationships** with each other and our **relationships** with God. Through these relationships we get a **glimpse** of the **divine** intent for our **own** lives so that this vision shapes our moral character—our **dispositions**, our **motivations** toward others, and our ways of **interacting** in the world.

What Jesus has given us here in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is an **example** of what it means to **keep** God’s commandments, an example of discipleship, and how to **live** a Christian life.

I am **sorry** to say it, but that is **not** how much of our world today functions: people **do** kill people, we **do not always** treat our neighbors with kindness and forgiveness, people **do** get divorced, adultery **does** occur, and sometimes **one’s word** is worth little.

**Thanks** be to God we Lutherans are a *Law and Gospel* people. I believe we **do our best** to uphold the commandments and treat our neighbors as ourselves. **When** we slip we have the grace of God to fall back on because as it is written, “*God’s grace is sufficient*”. We **sin**—God **knows** it—that is why Jesus Christ **came** to this world to **take away** our sin by dying on the cross for us. God **knows** our sinful nature. We are **not** perfect people. As I said earlier, we are called to push through the challenges and wrestle with how these texts call us to live.

**Thanks be to God—grace is ours. AMEN**

