

Sermon for Epiphany 6A
Sunday, February 12, 2023
“Relationships Matter”

Text: Matthew 5:21-37

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s gospel reading is one that is not easy to hear and is even more challenging to preach. We hear some very harsh words from the mouth of Jesus. The Church throughout history has used some of these verses to enact very extreme interpretations upon believers, but the lesson to be learned here is not about memorizing a set of rules or how to enforce them, but rather, it’s about strengthening relationships with each other and with God.

Our lectionary continues for the third week in a row the words of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. The intent of Our Lord’s discourse hinges on verse 17 from the 5th Chapter of Matthew, which we heard last week: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Jesus wanted to enlighten his hearers on what the law meant for humanity as we relate to each other and with God. In today’s reading, Jesus does that by giving a series of antithetical statements: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times...but I say to you...” The problem is that his words seem awfully harsh as he gave the people his wisdom. By the end of this part of his sermon, one might come away with fears of self-mutilation as a punishment for one’s sins. Well, if we really took any of it literally, none of us in this room would have any hands, feet, eyes, or tongues left. But, that’s not what this lesson is about. Jesus is not *really* telling us to hack off our body parts; he is being overly dramatic in order to emphasize how important our relationships with each other are and how the ancient law of Moses does, in fact, help to maintain those relationships.

Our relationships matter to God. A commentary I read about today’s scripture passage said this:

“Our relationships matter to God...Notice that each of these different injunctions concerns how we treat each other. Jesus doesn’t just heighten the force of the law, he broadens it:

- It’s not enough just to refrain from murder. We should also treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful words.
- It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.
- It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable—in [ancient] culture that often meant women and children—are provided for.

- It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all."

Jesus drives home those points by using words that are meant to jar us, to wake us up, to make us think more deeply about God's commandments. Another commentary I read wrote: "What if God isn't interested in us keeping the law for the law's sake, but rather that God cares that we keep the law for *our* sake; that is, because God loves us." The mistake that the Pharisees and scribes often made was that they insisted that The Law be followed for the law's sake, and Jesus spent much time and energy in the stories and parables from the Gospels by scolding them for that. The expectation for us in reading today's gospel text is that we recognize how God's commandments for us are meant to help us get along with each other in love and respect, and in turn, we show love toward God because we love and respect his creation.

Our relationships matter to God, and we are invited as Christians to live our lives in a way that goes beyond blind following of a set of rules blindly. We are invited into deeper relationship with each other and with God. How do you control your anger toward others? How have you reconciled yourself with your sister or brother? Have you knowingly or unknowingly disrespected the humanity of someone else or even yourself? Have you been completely truthful with yourself? with those around you? with God? Doing any of these things is not always easy. The life that Jesus calls us into in his words from the Sermon on the Mount bears many challenges, because it is much easier to stay mad at someone than to approach him/her and work at reconciliation. We don't like it, because it forces us to take a risk, a risk at showing our vulnerability, maybe even admit that we are wrong. We don't like it, because it might make us seem weak or not in control. We don't like it, because we might fail. Well, if we try to engage in the life that Jesus calls us into by ourselves, we *will* fail. We cannot deepen our relationships with God or with each other unless we seek God's help—help that we can find through ways such as personal prayer, prayer in community, the study of scripture on our own and in community. But, when we do fail, we must remember that we're also human; we don't always get it right, we make mistakes, we fall short. When that happens, God is there to lift us up. We can't overcome our failures unless we remember that God's love and mercy are beyond our understanding.

Our relationships matter to God. When a Biblical passage seems difficult to understand or when one makes us uncomfortable, we have the reassurance that our relationships matter to God, because if you think about it, the Bible contain story after story that are examples of what happens when relationships are good and what happens when they're not. But, scripture is also the record of how God continues to love humanity; although we are imperfect and broken, God continues to love us, because we have been created in his image, and God always sees a little bit of himself in us. With God's help, we will see God in each other, too. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Epiphany 6A (Year A, Volume 1)

Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-relational-god>

SermonWriter, <http://www.lectionary.org/SW/02-16ee/Matt.5.21-37.htm>