

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, 12 February 2017
Matthew 5.21-37
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

“You have heard it said to those in ancient times,...But I say to you...”

Commentators usually refer to these statements as “antitheses,” since Jesus is comparing a typical way of interpreting the law with his way. “If you are angry with a brother or sister, you shall be liable to judgment...everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart...anyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity [a qualification not in Mark or Luke, by the way], causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery [Mark applies this teaching on divorce to women, as well]...Do not swear at all [that is, do not give an oath]...anything more comes from the evil one...”

If these are truly Jesus’ expectations for his followers, is there any hope for of us? Who could possibly live up to these standards? And we’re not done, either; next week we get the rest of his antitheses, and we’ll see then that Jesus heaps even more on us. In short, nobody gets off the hook, and for two thousand years these statements have caused committed Christians to squirm in their pews and preachers, if we’re honest, to hang our heads for our own hypocrisy, knowing that we, too, have failed to live up to many of these expectations.

How, then, should we understand them? Should we strive even harder, or should we find ever more clever ways to argue that Jesus really couldn’t have meant what he seems so clearly to say? Well, if we’ve gotten nothing else from my sermons in the last few months, I hope I’ve persuaded you by now is that we cannot understand Jesus without understanding his Jewish background.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book in 2011 titled, *God is Not a Christian*, and I would add that Jesus wasn't either. If ever there was a time we needed to understand Jesus' Jewish background in order to understand his teaching and actions, today's lesson from Matthew is one of those times.

These teachings by Jesus are a continuation of Matthew's version of the Sermon the Mount and, for Matthew, anything that happens on a mountain is symbolically significant. That's where God was usually to be found in the Old Testament, and just as Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, so Jesus, as the new Moses, is here delivering his version of the Law from a mountain. Probably like most of you, I was always taught that Jesus was actually more relaxed about the Law than other Jews of his day, but, if anything, his interpretation seems much more demanding.

This portion of the Sermon on the Mount follows immediately from the lessons of the last two weeks. Two weeks ago, we heard the Beatitudes—the nine blessings near the beginning of Matthew which, as we'll see later, are framed by a list of seven curses in chapter 23. Then last week, though I didn't preach on it, we heard Jesus say, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (5.17). This statement leads right into today's lesson, where Jesus ratchets up his rhetoric with a series of statements that seem to be, if not actually a new law, at least, a much more demanding interpretation of the old law. "You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times...But I say to you..." To understand our lesson today, I believe we need to know what Jesus meant when he said he came "to fulfill the law," and to do that we must ask what its *purpose* is.

Why did God give the Jews such a law and why did God make its observance a condition of their covenantal relationship? The key to answering this question may be found in an important Hebrew word, *hesed* or *chesed*. It has been traditionally translated as “lovingkindness” or simply as, “love,” but a better understanding might be “covenant loyalty.” The covenant binds the Jewish people and God together in order to enlist their help to fulfill God’s purposes on earth, that is, to help God restore creation. Observing the obligations of the law, as obligations of the covenant, is an expression of Jewish loyalty and loving commitment to God. That is its purpose. In Matthew, Jesus does indeed argue with other Jews about the purity codes around eating, but he also claims that many of his fellow Jews have misinterpreted what the law truly requires.

One commentator suggests that the antitheses on murder, adultery, oaths, and, next week, on judicial revenge and hatred of our enemies, may be seen as a kind of exegesis or exploration of the beatitudes themselves. And, as we observed, this whole portion of the Sermon on the Mount “intensifies” or increases the demands of the law in ways that were quite different from, say, the Pharisees, who, though with good intentions, defined ever more minutely what actions were required to keep the law. Instead, Jesus seems to be challenging his fellow Jews, and thus us, as well, to “a totally integrated loyalty of heart and act” (NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 289-290). Jesus is reaching back, here, to the prophecies that predicted in the last days the spirit of God would so empower the people of Israel they would freely and gladly keep the law. These demands, then, are not, as is often claimed, contrasting inward and outward forms of keeping the law; rather, they are Jesus’ way of trying to redefine what it means to be a Jew living *as if* the kingdom of God were truly as

near as Jesus claimed. They, and again, we, are to emphasize love and mercy as a way of life, and forgiveness as the “hallmark of all social relationships” (NTPG, p. 292).

We’ll revisit some of this next week, as I indicated, and hopefully deepen our understanding of Jesus’ radical teaching. For now, let me close by suggesting, first, that Jesus is reiterating what we have seen two weeks ago, in the Beatitudes. That is, he is arguing that if we want to see the kingdom of God fully present on earth we need to act like its already present. If we want to see love in the world, we must learn to love. If we want to see mercy in the world, we must learn to be merciful. And, if we want forgiveness in the world, we must learn to forgive as we’ve been forgiven.

Second, this teaching on forgiveness, emphasized by Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer somewhat later in Matthew, is the lens through which I understand the demanding expectations of these so-called antitheses. I cannot, as follower of Jesus, or as an ethicist, interpret them so as to simply let myself off the hook. I might, with God’s grace, live up to some of those demands, but I know I’ve already failed in other ways, no matter how hard I have prayed or tried. In failing, I disappoint myself, and I’m sure I’ve disappointed those who know me and, alas, without doubt I’ve disappointed God. But with God’s forgiveness, I can forgive others when they disappoint me and I can ask for forgiveness when I disappoint you, as I sure will.

Jesus *was* demanding—I don’t think there’s any way to get around that and still claim to be a follower of Jesus—but he was also forgiving. And thank God for that, for in that forgiveness is where our hope lies.