

Sirach 15:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Psalm 119:1-8
Matthew 5:21-37

Epiphany 6A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Becoming the Beloved Community

When Bishop Rickel came for his last visit, he asked the vestry what our vision for St Barnabas was. We have a shiny new mission statement that we're pretty happy with, but we hadn't yet articulated a vision statement. What we settled on was *Becoming the Beloved Community*. And as it turns out, if we are true to our mission – to be a community of faith that welcomes and values all people, committed to following Christ, serving others, growing in faith and transforming the world by sharing God's love, if we're doing those things, we are well on our way to becoming the Beloved Community Jesus so often talks about. It's what he's talking about today... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Today's gospel reading, filled with the "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." sayings has long been misinterpreted. You have heard me say that we always need to read scripture in context, so let's contextualize today's reading. Do you know where we are in Matthew's gospel? Jesus was just tempted for 40 days and 40 nights by Satan, and having been attended by the angels, made his way to Galilee to begin his ministry there. So it's early, very early on in his public life. He'd only called four disciples at this point - the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John, who along with great crowds of people, followed Jesus up a mountain. You know something important is going to happen anytime somebody goes up a mountain! They followed him up the mountain and heard him preach what we now know as the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon lasts three chapters of Matthew's gospel and begins with the beatitudes. And the first word of Jesus' first great work and most famous sermon is "Blessed." Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, the ones who mourn, the merciful, the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, the persecuted, the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness... I'm guessing I would have stayed for three chapter's worth too, if those were the first words I heard. Blessed are you, he said. Blessed are you.

And if all that blessing wasn't enough, he told them they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Can you imagine it? Can you imagine what it must have been like for all of those regular and sort of unimportant people – not the most scholarly, not the most religious, not the most well-known or even popular – all those regular and unimportant people, people like you and me being convinced that they were the light of the world? It had to have astounded them.

Do you see what's happening here? It's only after Jesus establishes for his hearers who he knows them to be, only after he has their attention and curiosity and perhaps even the beginnings of their trust, that he begins to tell them about himself. And the first thing he tells them is why he has come to them.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Matt. 5:17-19

Jesus is careful. He is thoughtful. He knows very well what the people in his care, care about. So even though he's about to say some things that might seem to contradict the law and the prophets, he tells them flat out, that's not what he is doing. You see, all that background, all that information, all that context is essential to understanding today's reading.

The way Jesus built this foundation of trust was particularly important for Matthew's hearers. They were for the most part Jews, people who knew and loved the Law and the Prophets, people who were not only ethnically Jewish, but Jewish in their life's orientation and in their day to day lives too.¹

So you see, if Jesus hadn't built that foundation of trust, hadn't truly seen the people for who they were, hadn't assured them of his respect for Jewish Law and the prophets, "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." would not only have seemed utter disregard for all they had known and loved and lived by for generations, it could have been terribly misinterpreted. Jesus wasn't saying "You heard what Moses said, but I have something even better to say." Jesus was a practicing Jew. He came to fulfill, to round out, to en flesh and incarnate the Law and the Prophets. He came to teach us how to become the Beloved Community.

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." Harsh words, yes? But if we hear these words in the context of the Beloved Community, if we hear them as they were meant to be heard in community, and not as individualistically minded Americans, they take on new meaning. You cannot become the Beloved Community if you're angry with one another. You cannot become the Beloved Community if you talk about people behind their backs. You cannot become the Beloved Community if you gossip or insult one another. You don't have to murder someone to wreck the Beloved Community, you only need to be unkind.

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart..." It isn't enough not to sleep with someone else's spouse, just thinking about such things is dishonest, divisive,

¹ Foster, Willard, Brueggemann, Peterson; The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible; p.1792

disrespectful, and dehumanizing and it will destroy your relationships with that person, with her spouse, with your spouse and your relationship with God.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” We need to remember that in 1st century Palestine, divorced women were doomed to die, unwelcome in their families of origin and outcast by society. Caring only about yourself and your own desires is no way to build the Beloved Community. Everyone’s dignity must be preserved, or nobody’s dignity is preserved.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No...’” Speak the truth and be kind. Don’t create a world where people have to swear by anything. Let your yes be yes, and let it be true. Let your no be no, and let it be true. In the Beloved Community, we have to be able to trust each other’s word.

Can you hear what Jesus is saying? Do you see what he is doing? He is calling forth the Beloved Community and inviting us to be co-creators. The Beloved Community cannot come into being when we’re all operating at our individualistic lowest common denominators... don’t kill anyone. Don’t sleep with anyone else’s spouse. Don’t swear to God. The only way we can build the Beloved Community is by building loving, trusting, life-giving relationships with everybody, not just the ones we love the best and not just the ones who are like us.

Loving, trusting, life-giving relationships are so important, in fact, that Jesus makes some of the boldest statements of his life about them. If your eyes or your hands or any other part of you is compromising your relationships, you’d be better off, chopping them off. That’s intense. And don’t even think about coming to the altar to offer yourself to God if you know someone has a problem with you. If someone has something against you – not if you have something against them – if someone has something against you, it is incumbent upon you to go and make things right.

In saying we cannot come before God when our relationships are broken, I think Jesus must be saying that when our relationships with one another are broken, our relationship with God is broken too. In other words, the way we love each other – or don’t – is the way we love God – or don’t.

There is a reason for the directives Jesus offers up today, and it isn’t to give us a list of behaviors to engage in or avoid. The words we heard in all of our readings today call us to rich and abundant life in God – lives that give life and light to the world. We have a choice – Ben Sira made that clear. “If you choose, you can keep the commandments,” he said, “and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.” It isn’t enough to check off the boxes and be good or even excellent behavers. We are called into honest, trusting, loving and transparent

relationships with everyone we encounter. That's how we make our vision of St Barnabas come true. That's how we become the Beloved Community.

The more we conform our lives to God, the more life-giving lives we will live, not just for ourselves, but for everyone else too. This is how we build the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of Heaven right here on earth – by building relationships and communities that are tender and strong and vulnerable and true, communities that aren't based on getting things right or following rules and checking off boxes, but communities that can count on the promises and commitments we make to each other because we know our relationships are treasures, gifts of unspeakable value to be nourished, nurtured and held with utmost love and care. Amen.