February 16, 2014 – 6th Sunday after Epiphany

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At the end of last week’s Gospel reading, after having challenged his disciples to a new way of following God, Jesus left us with this:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Although Jesus would go on to condemn the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees later on in Matthew, here he is using them as a benchmark of righteous behavior. They are the keepers of the law – that same law that Jesus has just said that he has come to fulfill. But in order for their righteousness to exceed that of those who know the law the best, Jesus directs his disciples to a new reading of the old Torah. Which brings us to today’s Gospel passage.

As examples, Jesus chooses two of the Ten Commandments – murder and adultery – and two of the other 603 Jewish commandments that are found throughout the Torah – those concerning divorce and swearing false oaths. The disciples would have been very familiar with all of these, as would Matthew’s mainly Jewish audience. But both groups must have raised their eyebrows into their hairlines at what Jesus DOES with those familiar laws.

“You shall not murder.” Sixth commandment – got it. But then Jesus takes it one step further. If you are so much as MAD at someone you will be liable to the same judgment as if you murdered them. And if you insult anyone – literally, if you call them a numbskull – you will be subject to judgment by the Jewish religious authorities – the Sanhedrin, or even if you merely call someone a fool – and who among us hasn’t done THAT on occasion – you will be subject to the fires of hell.

Pretty strong stuff! But Jesus is just getting warmed up. Next he turns to adultery and says not only is actively committing adultery bad, but even looking at a woman with lust in your heart, as Jimmy Carter once put it, to the delight of comedians all over the world, is just as bad. Matthew uses the word, “*epithumeó*,” which is translated here as lust. But this is more than just being attracted to someone in a hubba hubba kind of way. This is actively and single-mindedly trying to figure out a way to possess something that isn’t yours to possess. Of course in our modern world, women are hopefully NOT seen as possessions, but we have to put this in Matthew’s context.

Moving on to divorce. Divorce in Jewish law was pretty easy for a man, although Deuteronomy 24:1 is an attempt to make it less capricious than it had previously been. Jesus doubles down in favor of women by saying that if a man divorces a woman he causes her to commit adultery as a result, which in turn, would make HIM guilty of causing her to sin as well as causing anyone who marries her to sin, thereby breaking another commandment himself.

I have to mention the exception clause that Matthew throws into this verse – “except on the ground of unchastity.” You know I love to joke about scholars bickering over interpretations of various texts, and this one is no different. It’s probably even a bit worse here because there’s sex involved. The bottom line is that the other two synoptic Gospels, Mark and Luke, don’t have that clause in their versions, so whatever the various scholars think, they are pretty much in agreement that this was one of the many editorial embellishments that Matthew was fond of adding to the original source text. As such, it might have had more meaning to Matthew’s original audience than it may have to us. But that’s a debate for another day.

And finally, Jesus talks about swearing oaths. The commandment forbids swearing falsely, but Jesus takes it one better and says don’t swear at all, even by heaven or the hairs on your own head, but rather simply mean exactly what you say by your “yes” or your “no.”

Now, Jesus has a perfect right to rewrite his own commandments – he IS God after all. But these seem a bit out there unless we look at the bigger picture. That bigger picture is relationship and reconciliation.

Let’s start from the top. Not only should we not commit murder, which seems reasonable, but we shouldn’t even get mad at someone or call them a fool. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. Be reconciled to anyone with whom you are at odds, no matter whose fault it is, before coming to the altar with your sacrifice, because how you conduct your relationships affects your sacrifice.

If you have a legal disagreement with someone, figure out a way to settle before it gets to court – in other words, before it gets past the point of repairing a relationship – because that relationship is more important.

Here’s an example: A friend of mine’s mother and father were in a terrible car accident, which was her father’s fault. Her mother’s insurance company had her mother sue her father for pain and suffering, which they won and my friend’s mother received a large settlement. Sure, they, as a couple, now had a lot of money, but the damage that had been done to their relationship because of the lawsuit was never repaired and they remained cold and angry towards one another until the day he died.

Think about our relationships first, Jesus is telling us, before other considerations. And when there is a breach, find a way to repair it. This is why we put the General Confession before we come to the altar for Holy Communion. It’s not meant only to wipe the slate clean of any transgressions we might have committed in the previous weeks, although God’s absolution is just that – absolute. It’s also meant to give us pause to think about how we are in relationship to each other and to God, and to pray to find a way towards reconciliation.

In his already harsh words about adultery, Jesus goes on to say it’s better to put out your own eye or cut off one of your own limbs than to do something that will earn you a one way trip to everlasting torment. I feel confident saying that we don’t have to mutilate ourselves, but once again looking at it in terms of relationship, Jesus is saying that we have control over our own bodies and we can decide how to act on the impulses that we, as human beings, sometimes experience. And he’s saying that the better road is to not give into to those impulses, no matter how difficult it might seem at the time.

In the case of adultery, how many relationships are destroyed because of even a momentary lack of self control? Certainly the primary people involved, but also children, co-workers, and even the community. Seeking forgiveness and reconciliation is vital, but it’s better, Jesus is saying, to not even head down that road, and we have the power within ourselves to stop it.

But it’s just not adultery in the classic sense that can break relationships. Workaholism, resentment, boredom, and apathy can be just as bad, without there even being another person involved. Anything that distracts us from, and causes us to turn our backs on those we are closest to is dangerous, but once again, we have the power, with God’s help, to not give in to those distractions.

Jesus’ next words on divorce flow naturally out of the previous section. Sometimes, looking at life realistically, complex relationships like marriages don’t always work out for many reasons. But it’s as imperative to seek reconciliation in a failed relationship as it is in a successful one, and for both people to seek forgiveness for the hurt and anger that almost inevitably follows. This is not the easiest path to take. Holding onto resentment is an easy way to mask the pain we are feeling, but it’s important to all our other relationships to try – especially our relationship with God.

Finally Jesus tells us not to swear oaths at all, but rather let our “yes” or our “no” mean what they say. In the ancient world, oaths were very important both in civil law and in spiritual law. But not unlike today’s laws, more and more loopholes were being built into oaths so that they could be broken at will, and therefore the whole process was starting to become meaningless.

Jesus is cutting to the chase here. Swearing is meaningless if you don’t mean it; therefore, don’t even bother. He’s telling us to live our lives with complete integrity, rather than relying on empty words and promises.

And a life lived with complete integrity means that all our relationships – close or casual, successful or failed – are built on truth. This should be our ultimate goal – to build and maintain all of our relationships with each other and with God, upon the solid foundation of truth. We are human, and subject to human emotions and passions, but if our relationships are built on truth, we will naturally seek to put those relationships ahead of any fleeting feelings and impulses we may experience.

Jesus is not telling us to poke out our eyes or cut off our hands, or that we’re going to hell. He’s telling us to love one another, and to build our relationships and our communities on the foundation of that love. And when, not if, we fall away, he’s telling us to always turn back to that love that passes all of our understanding. That’s where we will find God.

Amen.