

Message for Feb. 12. 17 “The Constant Love of God” *Based on Matthew 5: 21-37*

So, we’re carrying on today with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which are a series of his teachings found in chapters 5, 6 & 7 of Matthew. These teachings are Christian Living in a nutshell—want to know what it means to live like a Christian, than read these 3 chapters, and I suggest a more modern translation would help with the readability, and hence your understanding of the teachings. So a quick re-cap—Matthew begins this sermon with the beatitudes, with Jesus telling the people that they are blessed -- whether they were poor in spirit, which means feeling a lack of God in their lives, or they were mourning—grieving a loss or hungering and thirsting for justice in the world – whatever was lacking, hurting, missing, God was with them and could be counted on as a source of strength. Jesus was reminding them they were all God’s children and loved by God. That too is good for us to be reminded of, that God created us for love -- to receive God’s love to share God’s love, and that we are cherished by God.

Next Jesus is essentially giving the disciples their marching orders by telling them they are the salt of the earth. Salt enhances the flavour of food; salt preserves the goodness of food, and our bodies require salt. Salt is necessary for our health and very survival. So, by us being the salt, as Jesus said, we are necessary, needed to bring Jesus’ teachings to the earth, and keep the message fresh, as it were—spreading the message of God’s love in Christ. Plus, Jesus tell them, you are the light, so let your light shine before others. Hold that light high to spread the light, to invite others into the circle of the light--Christ’s light. And what is that light? Jesus’ message of forgiveness and eternal life.

Now the rubber hits the road: Jesus discusses four ancient teachings; about murder, committing adultery, divorce and breaking vows. Jesus introduces each teaching by saying: “You have heard it said, ... but I say unto you...”— What is he doing here? Is he refuting the ancient scriptures, bringing them some new fangled interpretation of their laws, the Torah?

Firstly he says the law stated that those who murder are liable for judgement. And yes, so should it be. But, Jesus says, those who are angry at someone are just as liable for the same judgement as a murderer and as are those who insult someone. Wow, that seems unduly harsh!

And a man who looks at another woman with adulterous lust is as guilty of adultery as the one who has committed the actual act. Really? So better to cut out your eye or cut off your hand, rather than be led into sin? Now, that’s seems a bit over the top.

He then says that men who divorce their wives without just cause are condemning their wives to adultery. Ok, that one really seems to be bizarre for our 21st century ears, and needs a bit of explaining. The Torah allowed men to divorce their wives if they chose to, for any reason the man wanted. It was pretty simple; men could simply give a certificate that told their wives they were divorcing them. Women of course couldn’t initiate divorce. And a woman on her own had no status and limited resources in such a patriarchal society. Their only recourse would be to turn to their family of origin, if they would or could take them back or try and find another man to support them. And divorced women were not highly sought after, as I’m sure you can appreciate.

So what is Jesus saying and doing with all this hyperbole, this over the top language? Does he really want them to gouge out their eyes and cut off their hands or go to jail for being angry and having adulterous desires?

Is he really giving them new laws? Well, no, Recall, at the beginning of this Sermon on the Mount he tells his listeners, that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill them.

No, these were not new laws, these were the same laws, but over time the people had lost –or chose to ignore, why the law was implemented in the first place. They were living by the letter of the law, not the reason for the law, the intent of

the law. I liken it to when you tell your kids to do the dishes after supper. And that's just what they do—wash the dishes. But they don't dry them, they don't wipe down the counters, or rinse out the sink and the dish cloth is left as a wet lump in the bottom of the sink--never mind going the extra mile to sweep the floor! Did they do what you asked? Yup, but the intent was to clean and tidy up after the meal, and all they did was wash the dishes—the minimum required to fulfil the request.

So, back to the gospel reading. What was Jesus telling them? Yes, murder is wrong, but it is the hateful attitudes and intentions in our hearts that can lead to hateful displays of behaviour and murders. Wars don't start because people 'do unto others as we would have them do unto us'!

The lustful desire for wanting another man's wife constitutes adultery as much as the act itself, Jesus said. What is the true desire of your heart? And to divorce your wife without just cause—and in those days the only cause was infidelity—actually breaks the intents of the sacred bonds of marriage between man and woman, forcing the woman into another relationship just to survive.

So was Jesus then changing the laws? No. Over the years, the people had lost the intentions, the rationale for the laws creation in the first place. Jesus was bringing them back to why they were to live the way the laws had intended—not simply adhering to the letter of the law, and figuring they were good to go with that. To be a holy people meant living holy ways, which is always what God had intended for God's people. Jesus was renewing the laws within their hearts! This apparently new teaching was actually taking them back to their origins, a people called to be holy, called to serve God and live in God's holy ways.

These are good reminders for us today too. Over the years in our Church I think we've lost the reason, the meaning of what it really means to be Christ's Holy Church. We've been so caught up in caring for the building, paying the bills, the fundraisings, the various personality conflicts and looking back to the good old days when the churches were full and money wasn't a problem— we've forgotten what our true purpose is.

So, what is church really for? What are we called to do as Christians? The Great Commission from Matthew 28: 19-20 -¹⁹Therefore, go and make disciples ... baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

We are called to bring people to know Christ's love and forgiveness. We are called to bring people into a supportive community of Christian faith—a community that so loves and cares for Jesus that we want others to join and know that love—and go out and find them and bring them in. We are to help people come to know and believe in the unconditional love of God, that God really forgives our sins, that Jesus died to show us his love for God's people, and that life in Christ is eternal. We are to be community that shares what they have with the wider community—not because we're supposed to, but because we understand and know within our hearts the love of God has given us everything we need and more, and we want to share that love by giving wholeheartedly to others.

Have we been honestly trying to do that? Have we been truly living by the real intent of Jesus' command to make new disciples, to be his church—to spread the salt and shine high the light? If we're honest -- no, not really. And we haven't for a long time. As the numbers dwindle, we feel increasingly threatened, and we become protectionist of what we have and less willing to share, we look more and more at what we have and how to keep it, rather than reaching out to share it. It's a circling of the wagons approach, while it may feel like we're protecting and helping each other and holding onto what we have, it also keeps others out. We've lost the reason why we are called to be Church in the first place. We've lost the intent behind the Jesus teachings, true reasons behind the laws.

But we have not lost Jesus. Jesus is with us always—he told us that, on that we can rest assured! There is new life in Jesus—that is foundational to our belief as Christians. God’s love is constant, the Holy Spirit is always renewing, but often in a new and different way, a way that maybe we haven’t considered before, or even wanted to consider before. And to see God’s new way, we may need to look at it from a different perspective in the reality of our own day and time—much like Jesus brought the reality of his day and time to the ancient laws of Moses.

What two things can we count on in our lives – besides death and taxes? We count on, rely on the constant love of God. Another constant in our lives is change. Nothing but the love of God remains unchanged—including the Christian Church. The church has always been embroiled in controversy and challenge—since its very beginnings—it is after all a religious order founded on the teachings of a man executed as a criminal of the state. Over the millennia the Church has changed; buildings come and go, congregations come and go, but the message remains the same. The love of God in Christ is there. Jesus’ message of forgiveness and eternal life for believers is with us always. We know that and as Christians we know and we believe that nothing really dies, it just changes form.”¹ Amen.

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¹ Richard Rohr: A Spring Within Us (CAC Publishing : Albuquerque, NM. 2016, p 117)