

Epiphany 6 (A)
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Texts: Matthew 5:21-37

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When I was growing up—grade school, middle school—I understood faith as primarily a matter of obeying the rules. If you believed in God, you would obey the rules—all of the rules, especially the really important ones, like “You shall not kill” and “You shall not steal” and “You shall not bear false witness.” And even though, at that age, I didn’t have any real understanding of what “You shall not commit adultery” meant, I did get that pretty much anything related to sex—well, it was just all “No.” And I understood that when I obey all the rules, that is pleasing to God, and God would reward me. And conversely, disobeying the rules makes God sad, and would lead to punishment of some kind. I definitely didn’t want to end up on God’s bad side, so I bought in completely to obeying the rules.

I’ve come to see that as an entirely normal and developmentally appropriate way for children to relate to faith. But if you’re an adult, it’s not so appropriate, and truly not helpful—sort of like a child’s understanding of math might not be all that helpful if you’re trying to figure out your taxes, or a child’s view of relationships might not be all that helpful for navigating neighborhood or office politics. So, since I’m talking to a room full of adults (and a few very advanced children), I’d like to invite you to wonder how hear the words of scripture, how to hear the commands and the promises of God as expressed in the Jewish law and through the words of Jesus.

I wonder whether a helpful first step might be to observe whether, in our own ways of thinking about faith and imagining what God is up to in the world, whether there are remnants of the ways of thinking and imagining that were developmentally appropriate for us as children, but now have the capacity to nurture things we don’t want—things like pride or self-righteousness, because of the wonderful job we’re doing of being obedient; or maybe judgmental thoughts toward others, because of the very poor job they’re doing of being obedient; or maybe disappointment and resentment, because of how God seems to be falling down on the job of rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. These kinds of thoughts and attitudes won’t take us anywhere we want to go. Instead, once we’ve realized that God is not the global enforcer of morality, then we’re free to pursue the way of wisdom, to learn God’s way of love—not to get a reward or avoid punishment, but because it is how we experience the life we were meant for, life that is rich and true and meaningful. And maybe Jesus’ words in our Gospel reading for today have the potential to help us move forward on that journey.

I think it’s helpful to recognize that when Jesus draws our attention to the commandments, he isn’t abolishing the old Jewish law or replacing it with a new Christian law. Instead, he’s inviting us to recognize what God has been up to all along. God’s deep desire is to nurture a sense of deep connection across the human family, so that we recognize everyone as a neighbor and treat them that way, so that we recognize that we belong to each other. We experience life most fully as the beautiful gift God intends for it to be when we have relationships that are caring, honest and mutual. If we imagine life as like playing king of the hill, grabbing and pushing our way to the top, if we see other people as simply tangents, or even obstacles, in the story of our life, then we’re setting ourselves up for a genuinely sad, profoundly impoverished

life—even if we do get everything we think we want. This gift of life is all about community, about belonging, about finding our way through the challenges together. That means sometimes it requires forgiveness and reconciliation. It certainly requires compassion and generosity and humility. And those aren't exactly the qualities our winner-take-all culture nurtures or encourages.

Listen, then, how Jesus invites us to recognize how God's commandments are meant to draw us together—although we have to get past Jesus' over-the-top way of speaking about chopping off body parts or being liable to the hell of fire. He wants our attention. He wants to shake us out of just continuing our lives on autopilot. He wants to make it impossible for our faith to support a self-focused, self-serving way of being. If our religious question is "What do I have to do to get right with God?", then you can see how it's all about me. Jesus wants to lead us beyond morality, so that we can receive the profound gift that God is giving us, and he uses the commandments to take us there. He says, "You have heard that it was said, do not murder," but a person can avoid murdering others and still use words to kill their reputations or their spirits. You have heard that it was said, do not commit adultery, but a person can avoid adultery and still harm others by regarding them as sex objects. A person can be physically "faithful" to their marriage, yet still be emotionally unavailable because their primary relationship is with work, or the internet, or something else. And the reason for Jesus' over-the-top way of speaking is this: he wants to do more than simply invite us to recognize all the other people in our lives as children of God. He also wants to demolish our ability to not see them and not recognize them as ones whom God loves.

I've mentioned before about how, in my backyard, there's a big, smooth, gray rock. It doesn't do anything, or serve any purpose. It just sits there, and this time of year there's a nice coat of moss growing on it. And if you imagine that to be a Christian simply means avoiding sinful behaviors, then that rock is the very best Christian I know—because it doesn't do anything. But Jesus is calling us to follow him in a way of life that is rich and deep and full of blessing for us and for everyone else who is part of our lives. And when we live that way, we will experience God's gift, for our lives to be enriched by all our relationships. So how we treat each other is tremendously important. It's not enough to refrain from doing damage. Jesus calls to love our neighbors as ourselves, not only so that we can experience the joy and warmth and support of good relationships, but also so that we can be part of how God is renewing the human family and creating a new future, a new way of being in community.

So, in a healthy community, murder is a really bad idea. And so are anger and hate that are allowed to fester. It's not enough to resist murdering others. Jesus calls us to treat each other with care and honesty and respect, which means that careless and demeaning words should have no place among us.

In good relationships, adultery is a really bad idea. But adultery isn't the only thing that can damage relationships and degrade people. It's also damaging to see other people as objects or to think about them as if they existed merely for our sexual pleasure. Jesus calls us to be attentive to our habits of thinking and how we regard others.

In the same way, what Jesus has to say about divorce and about taking oaths is all about living with fidelity, not treating others as disposable or as means to our ends. It's not enough to

merely keep the letter of the law. What's important is how love shapes how we see every person, so that our choices aren't driven only by our wants and our desires, so that we treat others with honor and genuine regard. Everything Jesus says is to help us see beyond our own self-interest, so that we can live out of the recognition that every neighbor is a child of God.

People of God, living together like this is truly to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And the Spirit of God is at work in you to grow that kind of life. Jesus is not demanding perfection from us—Jesus knows we're not perfect. But Jesus seems to be confident that, with God at work in us, we are capable of much more than we usually imagine. So through the words of Scripture, Christ speaks to open our eyes, to see this amazing gift of life with new depth and richness, to see how we're profoundly connected to each other. Christ opens our hearts to recognize how living as a neighbor to each other—with compassion and forgiveness, and truly seeing each other as God's beloved children—is the only way of blessing, for us and for others. Jesus knows we're not perfect, but he also knows how rich and beautiful this life can be when it is defined by love. Thanks be to God. Amen.