

February 16, 2020 6th Sunday after the Epiphany
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37

Leaned into and quoted from: Eric Barreto's commentary on Matthew 5:21-37 on Working Preacher.org for February 16, 2020 and Debie Thomas' piece called But I Say to You posted on February 9, 2020 on Journey With Jesus. Also helped by Sermon Brainwave on Working Preacher.org for this date, and Rev. Kate Reuer Welton's sermon at ULCH on February 2, 2020. The song Christ Our Peace is by Tom Witt.

Peace, Christ's Peace, deep peace, to you this day. Amen.

I don't often put content warnings, trigger warnings, at the start of Gospel readings.

I do, however, flinch when I hear some readings. Maybe you do too.

I wonder how they'll be received.

If they'll pinch, or be one more reason for avoiding church.

If they'll be heard as Jesus may have intended, or if they'll be a snippet that, out of context, causes even more pain.

Today's reading prompted all this in me.

Hear that "content warning" before the Gospel as a way of saying,
brace yourself, this could be tough.

Take care, and if you're able, stick with me, go deep in the context,
and we'll work our way through together.

We'll seek the good news, and the grace, and we'll choose life.

Today is the third week that we read from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus began, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, the hungry, the merciful.

Gathered around Jesus on that hillside, looking out, they could surely see

the olive tenders and grape harvesters,

the women gathering water and the shepherds keeping their flock,

the communities, often impoverished, burden, nearly to breaking, under Roman occupation.

I can imagine the disciples shaking their heads:

this cadre Jesus called Blessed must have been surprising.

Last week's gospel picked up where the week before left off:

You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.

Remember, the you? It's not You singular, but rather You plural: You all.

And the verb? It's not future tense, but present: You all are, currently, right now, the salt, the light.

We are the salt of the earth,
we are the light of the world, so that we can make a space
where those gently radical, surprising, beatitudes are real,
where that cadre Jesus calls blessed can dwell.

What will this look like? How shall we act?

That leads us to today's gospel.

Sometimes I hear Jesus' words, especially this morning, and find them utterly overwhelming.

Anyone else have that first reaction?

They can feel severe and perfection-seeking.

How could we ever be what Jesus asks? Where is the Good News?

Remember: just like the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus here is saying You, you plural.

It's not about transactions: what I do, so that God will do X for me.

It's not about you being very good, or me trying my darnedest.

This is about You all, Us all.

This is about a new community,

a community that is "both blessed and commissioned to bless." (Debie Thomas)

Jesus, up on that windy, middle eastern hillside, is bringing about a radically new, beloved community.

It bucks the cultural constructs.

It transforms the social norms.

Life won't look the same.

The way we relate and interact, the way we do justice, the way we follow, it's forever changed.

Be careful, though, it's not new because it's replacing the old laws, the Ten Commandments.

Rather, it's new, because it's taking them further: "You have heard it said, but I say you to you..."

As Eric Barreto writes, it's not replacing the commandments, but intensifying them:

"Jesus here calls his listeners not to avoid these calls to righteousness

but to dig that much more into them,

to align our lives that much more with the abiding divine values these commandments communicate,

to commit ourselves to the transformative power of God's law and commandments.

So it's not simply the commandment do not murder, do not literally kill another,

but rather: consider all the ways our words and our action,

our inner most thoughts, our decisions, our purchases,
our rage, our resentments, our indifference,
our priorities squelch the life of another, or the life of our planet, or our own well-being.
So deal with your anger, opt for dignity, reconcile with your neighbor.
Even when it takes time, reconcile.
Do this not because that's what the rules say, but do this because in this beloved community
relationships are at a premium, relationships matter.

So it's not simply do not commit adultery, don't sleep with someone else's spouse,
but uphold another's human being's dignity by not making them an object for our pleasure.
Strengthen each other's relationship, one another's commitments, our marriages.

Debie Thomas says it well, asking:

“What about taking seriously our responsibility to encourage each other in holy living?”
She goes on, “Not “holy” as in stiff, boring, lifeless, and prudish,
but holy as in whole, abundant, faithful and life-giving?”
Can I get an Amen?

So it's not simply about “not swearing by anything on earth or in heaven,”

but it's about telling the truth: when it's yes, say yes.
When it's no, say no.
Make truth the mode of operation, make promise-keeping the norm.
That's how we use language in this beloved community of God—with care, with intentionality, with honesty,
with respect and dignity.

So it's not simply about divorce, but it's about how we care for one another.

Gender is all over this part of the passage.
In Jesus' day, with the social norms of his time, even more than now,
divorce would have left a woman destitute, quite literally starving, with nowhere to go.
Jesus is saying, probably to a primarily male audience, but to all of us:
we have responsibility with and for one another, and for our kin.
We have ties, we have cares and commitments.
In this beloved community value is placed on one another's dignity, one another's needs.
Even when relationships are broken,
even when a marriage must end, we have a role in making sure the other is cared for.

Eric Barreto writes of a beloved community that “organizes around love and not power,”

that “centers trust”,

that leans into the commitments that we make with one another.

It would be nice sometimes to just get out the list, yep, yep, done that, morality accomplished.

But Jesus is imagining this radical new community, this beloved community,

a community that is embodied,

that’s relational, that’s transformative, that flourishes.

That’s what Moses was getting at in our first reading today: choose life.

Choose life for this generation,

but choose it for now, so that it will flourish the generations to come.

Apply that to our work around the climate and eco-justice.

Choose life.

Hold onto it as we’re making decisions about our educational systems,

as we’re acknowledging the trauma, the complexity, that many face,

as we’re seeking healing.

Choose life.

Center that as we welcome new neighbors with dignity, with value,

as we beg forgiveness from those we harm,

as we gather our courage to go on another day in this fractured and brutal world.

Choose life, dear ones, by the grace of God, choose life.

Our hymn of the day is simple, let it take you deep.

“Christ our peace, you break down the walls that divide us.

Christ, our peace, come make us one body in you.”

Sing it a time or two using the music,

then let it be a prayer that finds its way into your bones, into your heart,

into this community, into our world.

For we, dear ones: we are beloved and blessed, and we’re called to be a blessing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.