

February 12, 2023 6th Sunday after the Epiphany
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

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

[Eric Barreto in Working Preacher: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37-4>. Debie Thomas on Journey with Jesus, But I Say To You: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2525-but-i-say-to-you>. Significant use of my own sermon from 2/16/20 at ULCH. Reference to Tom Witt's Christ Our Peace from Singing Our Prayer.]

Trigger warning for the Gospel: Today's gospel is a particularly challenging one, challenging in all ways, but especially related to divorce, and to how this gospel has been used by the church. I say this upfront as a trigger warning, a content warning.

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

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

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 bring up shame or confusion or anger.

If they'll be heard as Jesus may have intended,

or if they'll be a snippet that, out of context, causes more harm, causes more pain.

Today's reading prompted all this in me.

I even wondered if we should skip it: Not very annually-meeting-ish, it seems!

Hear today's "content warning" as a way of saying,

I know this one stirs up a lot of emotion,

so "take care," and if you're able, stick with me, go deep in the context,

and together we'll work our way through this challenging gospel, we'll choose life.

It is essential that we hear today's reading as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Two weeks ago we first heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, The Beatitudes:

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, the disciples could surely see

the olive tenders and grape harvesters,

the women gathering water and the shepherds keeping their flocks,

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

Perhaps to the surprise or even chagrin of the disciples, Jesus calls them, all of them: Blessed.

The poor in spirit, the hungry, the grieving, Jesus names them: blessed.

That's where Jesus begins: blessedness

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.

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

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

We all are the salt of the earth,

we all are the light of the world, so that we can make a space
where those gently radical, surprising, Beatitudes... are real,
where that assortment Jesus calls blessed... can dwell.

What will this community look like?

How shall we act with and for one another?

That leads us to today's challenging gospel.

Sometimes I hear Jesus' words in a reading like today's, 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?

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

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

This is about You all, meaning: Us all.

This is about a new community. A blessed community. A beloved community.

Jesus, up on that windy, middle eastern hillside, is laying out the *vision* for a radically new "way of doing life on the earth." (Eric Barreto).

Jesus' new way bucks the cultural constructs.

It transforms the social norms.

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

But...it's not new because it's replacing the old laws.

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

As Professor 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 ... 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 actions and our inactions,
squench the life of another, or the life of our planet, or our own well-being.

Hearing about the tragic stabbing of a 15 year old at Harding High School, by another student,

I've been thinking about murder and the culture of violence in which young people are growing up.

The Superintendent said something like, We're not okay, our kids are not okay.

Jesus says, work through your anger, opt for dignity, reconcile with your neighbor.

What would it look like to permeate a culture of reconciliation?

Truth is: reconciliations takes time and energy.

It can be slow and painful, and sometimes beautiful.

Do this not because that's what the rules say, but do this because in *this* beloved community on earth,
relationships are at a premium and trust is centered, and we choose life.

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, strengthen each other's relationships, commitments.

Debie Thomas muses:

"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 (w-h-o-l-e), abundant, faithful and life-giving?"

So it's not simply about "not swearing," 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.

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, and purity culture has done a number on it.

Here's the thing: in Jesus' day, with the social norms of his time,

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.

In this beloved community, value is placed on one another's dignity, one another's needs.

When relationships are broken, when they are no longer safe or life giving,

when a marriage must end,

we (we all) have a role in making sure the other is cared for.

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

that “centers trust”, that leans into our commitments.

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

But instead Jesus envisions this radical new community and what it looks like when it’s flourishing.

Choose life, Moses tells us. Choose life, Jesus preaches.

I was talking this week with Paul Odenbach.

Paul today becomes our congregational president.

He was commenting (and I have his permission to share this), that he’s nervous.

He said, “I love this community so much and I want to do right by it, by you all, by God,

I don’t want to mess it up.”

That’s an honest and humble sentiment,

one I’ve heard over the years from many of our congregational presidents.

A sentiment I share, too: I love you all, I want to lead you well, and faithfully.

And the truth is: Paul will lead us well, as Ann Agrimson is, as Uli Koester has, and so many before them.

You each come to this role - this beloved community - bringing your own personalities,

your own experiences, your faithfulness, your hopes, your strengths and your weaknesses.

And God gives the growth.

This morning we welcome new members.

They are a wonderful and unique crew, choosing to venture with this community in this season.

There’s a responsibility in being Christ’s community and most of the time we’ll do well,

and sometimes we’ll *disappoint one another*.

I don’t like to say that, but it’s true.

Dear ones, this is Sermon on the Mount kind of stuff:

for at our best, we’re not the Rotary (even as good as the Rotary might be),

but Jesus calls us (plural) to be this radical kind of faithful community that follows his lead of love,

his way of justice, his path of grace, and by grace: follow we do.

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

Sing it a time or two using the music,

then sing it as a prayer that finds its way into your bones, into your heart.

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