First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

2/12/23

Obedience and Integrity

Matthew 5:21-37 - NRSVUE

**Concerning Anger**

**21**“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ **22**But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,[a] you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult[b] a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell[c] of fire. **23**So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, **24**leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. **25**Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court[d] with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. **26**Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**Concerning Adultery**

**27**“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ **28**But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **29**If your right eye causes you to sin,[e] tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.[f] **30**And if your right hand causes you to sin,[g] cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.[h]

**Concerning Divorce**

**31**“It was also said,” ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ **32**But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

**Concerning Oaths**

**33**“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ **34**But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, **35**or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. **36**And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. **37**Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.[i]

Today’s text is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, and picks up where verses 17-20 of last week’s Gospel reading leaves off, where Jesus is reminding us that he has not come to overturn the law, but to fulfill it. This section is divided into four parts, each describing how to deal with specific issues facing the people of Israel, as found in the Law of Moses.

If you look at all four of these sections closely, you’ll see Jesus restating the law, followed by the word “but.” This is significant, because it shows that while Jesus is honoring the original words of the Torah, he is also expanding what the Law can, and should, include. By the way, this would have driven the Sadducees absolutely nuts, because they believed that nothing could be added or taken away from the Law, as set down by God and given to Moses.

I’ll admit when I saw that this was the assigned Lectionary reading, for today, I groaned a bit. I find the issues that Jesus is addressing here, to be thorny and difficult to discuss, without going full on Old Testament on y’all which, as most of you know, really isn’t my style. Still, these are the words of Jesus and, no matter how difficult it can be to understand their meaning, we can’t ignore them. And, on a side note, being willing to wrestle with tough texts, is necessary for our ability to grow as Christians.

So, I had a choice this week. I could have attempted to jam everything I wanted to say about this passage into one sermon, which could have been overwhelming for you and probably would have caused your eyes to glaze over, or I could focus my attention on one part, which is the choice I made.

So, after this rather lengthy prologue, we’re going to dive into the section dealing with anger, specifically verses 21 and 22, which read,***‘****You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’**But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,[a] you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult[b] a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell[c] of fire.*

How many of us have said things, in anger, that we end up regretting? Being the hot-headed Irishman that I am, I’ll be the first to admit that I’ve done this more often than I should, and it’s something that I continually have to work on. Now Jesus equating anger with the act of murder, scares the crap out of me, so you’d think I should be pretty good at anger management, but I’ll admit that, for me, this is often aspirational.

I believe by equating anger with murder, Jesus is reminding us that words spoken in anger are actually a form of murder. Not the murder of the body, as much as the murder of the spirit, which can be just as deadly as taking someone’s physical life.

Words are very powerful. They can uplift, or they can destroy, and it doesn’t take much for either of those scenarios to play out. It seems to me that some of the most damaging words come from folks who claim to be followers of Christ. People, in my opinion, who should know better.

As someone who is part of a community that the church has fought, tooth and nail, to exclude from the body of Christ, for centuries, I’ve certainly been on the receiving end of my share of hurtful and destructive words from fellow Christians. Some of my earliest recollections of church revolve around hearing how people like me couldn’t possibly be part of God’s plan, and how we couldn’t possibly be *true* followers of Christ, unless we became someone other than the who God had created us to be.

Boy howdy, did I take that to heart. The shame I felt for the feelings I had, caused me to pray and pray and pray for God to change me. And when that didn’t happen, and when I realized it would *never* happen, I became so depressed that I attempted suicide, not once but twice. You see folks, words really do matter.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones. For whatever reason, I was able to weather the storms of hate and vitriol that were behind those destructive words uttered by good upstanding Christian folks. For whatever reason I’m still here, when so many just like myself simply are not.

I imagine there might be some of you who feel that I share too much of my personal life from this pulpit. But, let me be clear. Sharing my journey isn’t about bragging about my accomplishments, or trying to puff myself up. Nor is sharing my journey about trying to make you feel sorry for me. By sharing the journey I’ve been through, my hope is that you might see that there is a way to live a life of integrity, while still being obedient to God’s word.

For me, being obedient to the word of God, as found in today’s reading, means doing the best I can to control my tongue and not speak in anger to anyone. Am I always successful at it? Nope, but I keep trying. And, for me, living a life of integrity, means not being ashamed of who God created me to be and, at the same time, being willing to show love and grace to those who feel that people like me have no place in the Kingdom. Again, it’s not easy, and I’m not perfect at it, but I’m committed to keep trying.

The words we speak matter, folks. Speaking in anger, and refusing to be reconciled with those we disagree with, puts us in a situation where, as I see it, we can be judged as harshly as those who commit murder.

Your call to action, this week, is simply this: When, in the heat of the moment, you feel compelled to speak words that may harm another person, stop. Take a step back from the situation and think about the damage; think about the harm you may cause to a sibling in Christ, truly think about the consequences. Once words are spoken, it’s impossible to “un-speak” them. And, since none of us are perfect, when we speak in anger to someone, we must be willing to apologize, we must be willing to offer an olive branch, and we must be willing to strive for reconciliation.

We don’t have to agree with each other, or even like each other, but in order to live lives of obedience and integrity, we must be willing to acknowledge that all of us are children of God and act accordingly. All means all, y’all, and our words really matter; may we all choose wisely. AMEN