

February 16, 2014 - 6th Sunday after Epiphany
San Marino Congregational United Church of Christ

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Today's Text: **Matthew 5:21-37** (*The Message*)

"You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

"This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

"Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you're likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won't get out without a stiff fine.

"You know the next commandment pretty well, too: 'Don't go to bed with another's spouse.' But don't think you've preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

"Let's not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here's what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

"Remember the Scripture that says, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights'? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are 'legal.' Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you're responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you're automatically an adulterer yourself. You can't use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

"And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it.

Exploring today's theme,

"God In Relationship: Transcending our Legalism"

with Pastor Donald Shenk

Do you remember the old Yiddish proverb which goes, "Man plans, God laughs?" I think I might amend it this week to say, "preachers assume, God laughs." Delving into the first part of our scripture today as we explore the third part of Jesus's sermon on the mount as found in Matthew, I smiled,

remembering these wonderful words of Jesus taking the old and making it new in the traditional rabbinical teaching method of “You have heard it said... but I say...” For me, in the past, this somehow answered a lot of the questions I had about the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament as we were brought up calling it, as I assume were many of you. (There I go assuming again!)

So much of what is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures did seem so OLD to me. So many wars, so much killing, so many angry, treacherous people justifying their actions and their rebellions with the idea that God was on their side. I was so happy when the seemingly peace-loving, kind, caring Jesus came along, giving us the God I felt I could relate to, my God who cared deeply for humanity and abhorred war, murder and judging others for their missteps.

Oh yeah...I thought, I got this...all I gotta do is preach about the NEW God revealed in Jesus. Like Jesus is saying, “forget about that... Here’s THIS!”

But then...I started to dig a little deeper and read a little further and remembered that these were the same verses that have so often been used as a hammer over so many heads. Verses used to split families, heap shame on those already steeped in it and make Christianity feel like a hot poker that many in our modern world don’t even want to touch.

Although Eugene Petersen’s version of this part of Jesus’ sermon that Pat read so beautifully for us today is at least somewhat more palatable than many of the older translations, we must still deal with what Jesus is really getting at in these passages. No matter how much we may want to run from teachings that seem to set up an impossible set of rules; rules that appear to negate the seemingly unavoidable and absolutely human impulses of anger and lust; rules that seem to tell us that divorcees are basically doomed to commit adultery; and would have us cut off our hands and gouge out our eyes so at least our dismembered corpses will make it to heaven. I mean... REALLY, JESUS?!

We can take some comfort in the fact that pretty much every human being who has encountered these verses has struggled with them. Certainly the commentators and pastors and bloggers that I read this week often admitted to how challenging these verses can be to preach on and to delve into. There were many, in fact, who started out by saying, “you might be tempted to avoid this part of the lectionary....”

But, much to my consternation, I felt called to take up the challenge this week. What was Jesus doing here in his sermon? What was he asking of those hearing him then? What is he asking of us hearing these words now?

First, I do believe that Jesus was challenging his listeners to adopt a new way of thinking about the old laws and the ways in which they had been interpreted and adapted over the years. Don’t be caught in old ways of thinking, he was telling them. Understand that God is continually speaking and giving new and vital meaning to God’s laws and ways. Just as now, I believe Jesus is speaking to us in our day and in our time, reinterpreting the laws, giving us the tools, the intellect, the insight and the discernment to know what God is calling out for us NOW.

I had a great conversation with the Naylor’s last Sunday during social time as I was inquiring what that afternoon’s parenting class would be about. Turns out the topic was “Punishment vs. Discipline.” Michelle explained that it’s a difficult distinction for many parents to make since the ways in which most of us were brought up involved direct and painful consequences (punishment) for what our parents and guardians saw as inappropriate actions that needed to be curbed. Using a very real example from their own experience, Bret and Michelle explained how they came to a different understanding of teaching a child right from wrong and had witnessed their own child finding ways to

be honest and authentic with their own emotions and understand the consequences of their actions in a way that would have been highly unlikely with the “old” ways of reactive punishment.

I believe it is in this same way that Jesus is teaching his hearers that day on the mount and how God is teaching us right now to look beyond the letter of the law and the “way things have always been done” and go deeper into why a law has been created, a rule given or a commandment set in stone. It’s not about God wanting to hurt us, it’s about helping us to be the very best we can be and knowing in as deep a way as possible that God loves us. God is LOVE and against this there is no law. Jesus is asking us to dig deeper and see the consequences our actions have on others. Jesus is asking us to uphold our own relationships in as high regard as God does. To treat one another right not just because some law tells us to, but because we know each person to be a child of God in the same way God knows us to be.

“Jesus speaks the radical message of the complete law,” John Van de Laar writes in his article, *Living By Heart*, “calling us not just to ensure that we uphold the letter of the legal code, but that we uphold the dignity and humanity of our companions in this world. We cannot just avoid physically killing. We must also avoid destroying the dignity and reputation of another. If we seek life and wholeness, we will refuse to degrade another with our angry words – be they insults, gossip or manipulative “back-stabbing”. Rather, we will do everything we can to recognise the humanity of the other, and seek to be reconciled if at all possible. We cannot just avoid the betrayal of adultery. We must also avoid the betrayal of another person’s humanity by objectifying them and making them nothing more than an object of our own pleasure and satisfaction. We must also avoid the betrayal of treating another like property...to be discarded when we’re finished with them.”

As Rev. Melissa Bane Sevier says, “Jesus’ law of love draws us into a deeper understanding of our own hearts, and a deeper appreciation of how the other person occupies space in the heart of God.”

I was thrilled to find a new voice this week as I was reading and studying for today. Peter Woods is a Pastoral Therapist, Writer, and Conflict Mediator working in South Africa. In his brilliant article “The Law of Love or the Love of Law” he muses on how amused he is “by the ironic circles of history.”

“The essential teachings of Jesus,” he writes, “challenged the way the Pharisees had replaced the essential interiority of a relationship with God and a covenant written on the heart and not in stone with external legalism and ritual observance. The church took the Gospel of those challenges by Jesus and made them into external observance once again!” Rev. Woods says he, “would giggle at the irony if [he] didn’t know many whose lives were devastated by that mistake of the Church.”

“At first glance,” he continues, “it seems that Jesus is making it even more difficult to follow the rules. However, the teachings of Jesus [we heard today] are not intended to create more external laws, thereby deepening our self-loathing and despondency about ever making the grade or getting over the ever rising bar! [Rather, Jesus] is showing us the way to transcending our legalism.”

Before I began working at this church full time as a Pastoral Assistant, I spent many years toiling away as a Legal Assistant, working with lawyer after lawyer in many firms and institutions throughout the southland; I kind of fell into the work as a way to support what I like to call my “acting habit” in those days. Working in this field with attorneys of every stripe and kind, one soon realizes that what is going on in a person’s heart or what is really happening in personal relationships is truly at the bottom of the line of consideration where the law is concerned. One only has to watch Judge Judy or one of the many other televised “legal reality” (big quotes) shows that crowd our airwaves to know that a person’s circumstances, emotions, or beliefs carry very little and usually no sway when it

comes to making a judgment based on the law. And, in some cases, I imagine most of us would agree that this is probably the way it needs to be in many situations and, indeed, why God created some laws for us in the first place. But, as usual, we humans tend to go to the book, to the law, to the rule, and use it as proof of our rightness or as a “proof-positive” way to get around our wrongness.

Jesus pulls us out of this trap and asks us to consider our own soul as well as our neighbor’s and get to the heart of the matter. Jesus asks us to go further, dig deeper and love harder than we ever thought possible, knowing that it all is truly possible with God. “Hear the Good News!” Rev. Woods writes, “We act best not from fearful conformity, but from compassionate concern and perfect love.”

I want to leave you today with the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, the highly enlightened Zen Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet and peace activist. In his book “Peace Is Every Step” I think he is bringing forward for us today in our own context much of what Jesus was teaching the people of his day and wanting for us to hear this day. This particular passage relates very much to the first part of today’s teaching on anger.

“There is a term in Buddhist psychology,” he writes, “that can be translated as “internal formations,” “fetters,” or “knots.” When we have a sensory input, depending on how we receive it, a knot may be tied in us. When someone speaks unkindly to us, if we understand the reason and do not take his or her words to heart, we will not feel irritated at all, and no knot will be tied. But if we do not understand why we were spoken to that way and we become irritated, a knot will be tied in us. The absence of clear understanding is the basis for every knot...”

Pillow-pounding may provide some relief, but it is not very long-lasting. In order to have real transformation, we have to deal with the roots of our anger - looking deeply into its causes. If we don't, the seeds of anger will grow again. If we practice mindful living, planting new, healthy, wholesome seeds, they will take care of our anger, and they may transform it without our asking them to do so.”

Namaste. Amen.