

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, February 16, 2020)

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.

You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.

Exploring with Pastor Donald Shenk: “Right Relationship”

The right Reverend John Wesley, founder of our sister denomination, the United Methodists, once preached these words to his congregation so many years ago and they still inspire us today: “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In

all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.”

What a terrific summation of what Jesus is calling us to do as He continues his sermon on the mount as we heard Pat read so wonderfully from Eugene Peterson’s modern translation of The Message today. For more than being just a set list of rules and regulations, at the heart of Jesus’ message for us today is the idea that we are to consider each action we take and each thought we make and hold it up to the light of God’s will for us to live in right relationship with one another and with our God.

Is this thing we’re doing as good a thing as we can possibly imagine it to be? Is this action we’re taking for the good of God’s creation? Is this thought we’re having bringing about the good in our lives and in the lives of others?

As humans, I think we often long for a rule book and, indeed, there are those who think the Bible is just such a thing. But I think Jesus is leading us away from thinking of God’s laws as a to do list or some kind of legalistic ruler to measure ourselves against. Nor is it to be a judgment journal we can hold up in front of other’s faces and say, “see, I told you were wrong.”

Rather, Jesus leads us away from the shallow tit-for-tat interpretation of the law and asks us to look more deeply at our actions and our words from God’s perspective. As the prophet Samuel proclaims, “People look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.” (I Samuel 16:7)

Because you see Jesus wasn’t only inspirational and, what some would surely have said, fantastical in his teachings, he was also quite practical. He was helping to form community and bring us into right relationship with one another just as God was working to form community and establish right relationships within the Hebrew text for today from Deuteronomy; asking the children of Israel to love God, walk in God’s ways and observe God’s commandments. How should we live? By God’s ways. How do we live justly with one another? By loving one another as God loves us. How do we communicate, disagree and fight and still create community? By basing everything we think, do, say and think on the love our God has for us and on the love we have for our God.

But there’s a difference here between what we read in the Old Testament and what Jesus proclaims in the New. Whereas the Hebrew community would have used more punitive measures, the Way Jesus proclaims uses love as a guide. Rather than fear the retribution that would come from misguided action, Jesus calls us to embrace the love that comes from following God’s way and being in harmony with our brothers and our sisters.

Jesus asks us to live by our hearts, taking as the greatest commandment of all to love God with all of our hearts, souls and minds and aligning our actions with that love we have for God and God has for us. (sing) “Free your mind and the rest will follow.” could be sung by Jesus as “Love your God, and the rest will follow.”

“Words and actions matter, whatever they are,” our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum proclaimed this week. “Jesus reaches right to the heart of daily living and goes deeper with the commandments from Deuteronomy. From anger (vs. 21–26) to adultery (vs. 27–30) to divorce (vs 31–32) to using one’s voice (vs. 33–37), Jesus challenges each of us about how we are to behave as a people of God. There is no small standard here. The bar is set high.”

As we live our lives from day-to-day we each have choices to make and decisions to ponder. Will we use as our filter our own understanding of what we think works best or, more likely, what works best for US? Or will we use God’s filter and look deeply into our hearts and work to understand what it is God is calling us to do and what action God would have us take?

The joy is that we don’t have to do this alone. It’s a big reason of why we come together as a church. As Seasons states, “This week’s texts call us to work together toward a common purpose. As followers, we are given direction and the ability to discern God’s call as we strive to grow together into healthier personal relationships and forms of community. This kind of growth further expands our attention to the broader world and to our creative ability to share ourselves through our time, resources, and gifts. In this way, the community of faith can become an instrument of love, a beacon of hope and healing, and an usher of peace in a hurting world.”

When we come together with the common purpose of listening for God’s voice and working to be the most loving we can be as God’s children we are making a difference not only in our own insular community, but to those outside of our little community as well. The actions we take and the words we speak “out there” need to line up with the way we think and act “in here” where God instructs us and directs our lives both as individuals and as a community of love.

“There is a need...to look at relationships and how individuals treat each other,” writes UCC commentator Karen Georgia Thompson. “There is a value to life and how we value the lives of others. This perhaps is the heart of the matter in the text” before us today. “The problems cited are divisive and destructive for the life of the church. The issues themselves are not the problem; instead it is how members of the church are engaged with each other and allowing for unity to be present among them.”

Theologian Fred Craddock notes that, regardless of how the content of the text is interpreted based on the issues, a common thread persists: “all...can be embraced in one message if one remembers that [they] focus on a common theme – the primary importance of personal relationships.”

Jesus wants us to hold up how our thoughts, words and actions affect one another and how what we think, say and do makes a difference in how we shine as examples of God’s word. Take a look at your friendships, your marriage, your love connections and ask yourself if they reflect the way you believe God loves each person and if you can love in that same way.

“Relationships are not to be taken lightly,” exhorts Rev. Thompson. “The command to love God and to love others as self is unstated but is also central to reading the text. Mutuality and respect come when individuals honor neighbor as self. It is only then that right relationship is realized. Right relationship comes from the heart!”

Today is my parent’s 68th anniversary! Can you believe that? Here are two people who have always held up their relationship and their relationship to others to the light of God’s love and tried to exemplify it in their own lives and pass it on to their children and everyone fortunate enough to be graced by their presence. My hope today is that I may carry on that legacy of love and that each of us will find a way to be in right relationship with one another for each day of our own blessed lives.

Amen? Amen!