

The God-Honest Truth!

[Text - Matthew 5:21-24; 33-37]

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The Gospel writer Matthew describes Jesus on a mountainside delivering the teachings of the Holy One to the people gathered around him. Unlike Moses, however, Jesus doesn't present a Top-Ten version of his "Sermon on the Mount"- engraved on stone tablets. Instead, Jesus offers a living, expansive interpretation of those ancient "Laws of Moses". This past week as I reflected on Jesus' presentation, three particular things struck me as being particularly relevant for you and me in today's cultural climate. The first, is the importance of *flexibility*. The second, is the need for *reconciliation*. And the third is the critical importance of *truthfulness*.

We begin with *flexibility*. Jesus says, "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, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire!" [Or as Mr T might say, "I pity the fool who calls someone a fool!"] According to Jesus, the "Law of Moses" - the *Torah* - isn't simply a list of rigid, unyielding commandments set in stone. And just because something is found in ancient Scripture, it doesn't mean that it expresses the fulness of the Holy One's desire or intent. Some Scripture passages simply reflect the scientific ignorance or the cultural bias of the time and society in which they were written. Yet it's not that Jesus is rejecting the Scriptures; instead, he is raising them up and interpreting them in light of what he understands to be the Holy One's good and wholesome desire for humankind and for human relationships.

This flexibility in interpreting the Scriptures also calls you and me to be willing to stretch our minds and expand our thinking. For example, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’...” O.K., it’s confession time: Has anyone here ever *murdered* anyone? [Whew!] So I guess we’re all off the hook.... “Not so fast!” Jesus cautions us, “There’s *murder*, yet there are also many other ways in which to destroy a person’s life.” Unchecked bitter anger directed toward another can be extremely destructive to that person, as well as to oneself. Cruelly insulting or demeaning a person can be extremely devastating - as is evident with the rise of cyber -bullying. “But I never laid a finger on her!” “True, but your incessant belittling and ridicule certainly contributed to her taking her own life.”

To paraphrase an old saying, “The key-board is mightier than the sword.” Hateful, angry words can cut to the quick and pierce a person’s heart. Conversely, a kind and compassionate word can bring hope and healing, restoration and *reconciliation*. Jesus wisely connects that sacred commandment to “not murder”, with the sacred call to value, protect, and enhance the lives of all those around us. Jesus says, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be *reconciled* to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

I read this past week that the bitter divisiveness surrounding the presidential election has created some deep and seemingly irreparable rifts between friends and families. It’s not just the “un-friending” frenzy on social media; it includes shouting and shoving matches at family and social gatherings, as well as one couple actually filing for divorce on the grounds of “irreconcilable political differences”. It makes me wonder how many of those involved in these acrimonious actions are self-professed Christians. I don’t

have to wonder, though, what the essential Christian teaching on this matter might be.

First John Chapter 4, verse 20 says, “Those who say ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are not speaking the truth. For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” This brings us to the third quality that today’s reading raises, which is the critical importance of *truthfulness*. Jesus says, “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely...But I say to you, Do not swear at all!Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘ No’...”

I’ll admit that this is a tricky one. How does one discover truthfulness when surrounded by “alternative facts” and “fake news”? One barometer for me, is when people pepper their statements with the words “Believe me! Trust me!” I tend to become a bit skeptical and untrusting. When a direct question is circumvented with a string of unrelated rambling, and left unanswered, I generally suspect that the individual doing so is essentially avoiding the truth. “Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No!’” Yet while there are indisputable facts and undeniable truths, there are also 50 shades of gray-areas, differing opinions, and conflicting - yet valid - points of view.

The Christian Church itself, from its beginning and throughout its history, has known the strain of disagreements and divisions, political power struggles and poorly articulated answers to pressing social problems - such as slavery or women’s rights. Yet by the Grace of God our faith has endured, and will continue to thrive, by holding fast to the compassionate way of Jesus Christ. By saying “NO” to injustice and bigotry, fear and hatred; and saying “YES” to forgiveness and acceptance, openness and love. These are the black-and-white, cut-and dried principles that will sustain us and keep us faithful in the midst of Life’s surging

storms and troubling times. And that's the God-Honest Truth!
[...Trust me!]