

Rooted in Love

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Pray: Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control. Our hearts long to be made whole. Let inward love guide every deed, by this we worship and are freed. (*The Gift of Love* hymn, stanza 3)

February 16, 2020 Ord 6A

Fort Hill Presbyterian

Scripture: 1 John 4:16a-21

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. 17 This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. 19 We love because God first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! 21 This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Again, Jesus is teaching us what true righteousness- or right relationships looks like.

(Begin slides 12-14!)

Gospel: Matthew 5:21-37

5:21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

5:22 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.

5:23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

5:24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

5:25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court 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.

5:26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

I am going to pause right there to ponder what Reconciliation looks like in art.

(Show slides 15-19 as I describe each, then at end of reading go back to #14 the Sculpture from Coventry Cathedral)

- #15 *Reconciliation*, Netherlands
- #16 *Elements of Peace*, British Columbia, Canada

- #17 *Hands Across the Divide* --Derry, Northern Ireland- literally each man on a side of a wall that divided Protestants from Catholics erected 20 years (1992) after Bloody Sunday.
- #18 Slavery Reconciliation Statue Richmond, VA- triangle of Slavery trade route- Liverpool, England, Benin, Africa, and Virginia
- #19 Church of the Sermon on the Mount in Capernaum, Israel- Reconciliation of the three major Faiths- all Children of Abraham
- #14 Back to Coventry Cathedral slide- leave up rest of service if possible

5:27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

5:28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, 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.

5:30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, 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.

5:31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

5:32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

5:33 "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.'

5:34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

5:35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

5:36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

5:37 Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Proclamation of the Word

"... 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, then place your gift upon the altar," says Jesus.

I love these images of reconciliation which Chris has put on the wall. I was drawn to one in particular:

It is called "The Bridge" and it is at the Cathedral in Coventry, England.

We see a man and a woman reaching to embrace one another.

Anyone who has been at odds with someone, can find the beauty in that kind of reconciliation.

The sculpture was done by Josefina de Vasconcellos who writes:

"The sculpture was originally conceived in the aftermath of the War. Europe was in shock, people were stunned. I read in a newspaper about a woman who crossed Europe on foot to find her

husband, and I was so moved that I made the sculpture. Then I thought that it wasn't only about the reunion of two people but hopefully a reunion of nations which had been fighting."

You may recall that the Cathedral in Coventry was so badly bombed in World War II in November of 1940 that only the ruins still stand.

Three symbols were left that give the community strength and purposeⁱⁱ

Two remaining wooden beams in the shape of a cross were placed over the altar of the church, what we would call the Lord's Table for Communion.

And second, the original nails, hundreds of years old, were left.

So the church formed crosses out of those nails and decided they would form a ministry of reconciliation as their response.

After the war, they reached out to sister cathedrals in German cities Berlin and Kiel to form a partnership which they call the "Community of the Cross Nails."

Today they seek to teach about mercy, peace, truth, and justice as Christians living in the world.

The third symbol that was added were the words, "Father forgive" because they determined to make peace rather than seek revenge.

I was asked recently where is reconciliation in the Bible because it features heavily in the Confession of 1967?

Here we find the words of Jesus taking forgiveness and reconciliation to heart.

Jesus reminds us that the purpose of God's law is to live in God's love,
especially in the community of faith.

Before you come and worship God, go be reconciled to your brother or sister, says Jesus.

Jesus is not replacing the Old Testament law and the prophets, he is the fulfillment of it. In other words, Jesus transcends, rather than replaces the law.

He teaches us the ways of disciples who seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, as we sang last week.

Jesus teaches about doing the will of God, the truly righteous thing.

In other words, Jesus is getting at the root cause of the commandments like "do not murder""do not commit adultery" and "Do not swear falsely."

The word *root* is the same as *radical (radix)*.

Jesus is not usually seen as radical, but today from his words to us,
we can see that Jesus sets the bar high.

Jesus is indeed a radical after all because what he is doing with God's Law here is radicalizing it, getting everyone's attention back to the basics and the root origin of God's commands—
Jesus wants us to go underground to see what has been holding this whole thing up from the beginning so as to understand things afresh.

And from the outside looking in, it looks like Jesus is making the Law of God ridiculously hard to keep. He's turning the Law into something different, something harder and more difficult.

"You haven't slept with a woman not your wife? Good for you. But you looked at your co-worker Jill and thought about it so that 'Do not commit adultery' command is in shambles in your life as far as God is concerned."

"You haven't stabbed anyone through the chest or shoved someone to his death off a cliff? Good for you but when in your anger you told Harold last week to go jump in the lake, in God's eyes the 'Do not murder' command snapped in two in your life."

"You haven't sworn out a false oath in God's name? Good for you but when you knowingly lied to your boss about what you did while attending the convention, then in God's eyes the 'Do not give false witness' command died a sudden death."ⁱⁱⁱ

You are not trustworthy or honest.

Others should be able to trust your yes, mean yes and your no, means no.

Be a person of your word.

Tough stuff.

But at the root, the radical nature, of all of Jesus' teachings is love.

If we had to sum up this passage, I would say, first, at the root of "Do not Murder" is Love shows no hostility.

Second, at the root of "Do not commit adultery,"

Love is not predatory and respects marriage and family.

And third, at the root of not swearing falsely in God's name is this:

Love is unconditionally truthful.

Disciples are held to a high standard when it comes to relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and with our neighbors.

In the words from 1 John,

19 We love because God first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen!

Expectations for us, his followers, are based on living a new way of life.

In fact, since God is love, we called to reflect the image and character of God.

For instance, it is really quite easy for most of us to refrain from murder,
but Jesus takes it deeper to anger.

Jesus acknowledges the we get angry, but what we do with that anger is key.
And most of us are familiar with anger.

Political ideology feeds rancor. Drivers rage. Spouses demean. Bosses belittle people. Nations rage too.
Politicians show their fists.

Hoping for good, we grab our guns, or go after the other political party, or we blame whomever for
whatever.

There is a kind of accepted, expected anger in the world, in society,
in all of us, and it's the high god, the idol, who's commanding loyalty and devouring us all.
What a burden anger is- what destruction it causes.

Jesus exposes it, not to say *Shame on you or gotcha!! You're even more of a terrible person than you
thought!*

Rather, Jesus, like a gentle surgeon, lances the wound, lets the toxins seep out, and opens the way
toward healing.^{iv}

Reconciliation and peace.

"So what's the point, Jesus?" We might ask.

We believe that God's Law was intended for human flourishing and well-being.

That well-being includes what we do in our hearts and think with our minds.

Our well-being is wrapped up in one another, in the community, and in God's world.

So, our outside behavior needs to match our inside intention.

That is what it means to be a person of integrity,
or what Thomas Merton called the True Self.

The other option is to be a Fool, an idiot, or a hypocrite.

And the Bible does not treat hypocrites very kindly.

As one scholar writes,^v

*Hypocrisy is everything it's cracked up to be and sooner or later it has a way of brutalizing the
hypocrite, too. Remember in The Inferno Dante's clever punishment in Hell for hypocrites: they
were clothed with elaborate and resplendent golden garments but the garments were lined with
lead. To wear this attire every day literally weighed the person down with weariness and an
unending sense of burdensome heaviness. And that is what unremitting anger and lust and
deception does to us on the inside: it weighs us down, saps our joy, and sooner or later really will
show up on the outside in how we treat others, talk to them, regard them.*

I would venture a guess that we are all in favor of healing, peace, and reconciliation that God desires for us.

To sum up, in the words of an old song, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Before we come to worship or take communion or place a gift in the offering plate, go and approach your brother or sister who has wronged you...and make peace.

Like those folks at Coventry Cathedral who could have lashed out in anger or sought revenge, God opened their hearts, gave them strength to seek to make peace with their enemies.

Their action was rooted in the prayer, Father Forgive,
and over time, as they acted in peace,
reconciliation formed in their minds and hearts,
and in the divide between them.

God is pleased and glorified.

God's will is done, on earth as in heaven,

It is nothing less than what Jesus commands us to do.

ⁱ Slides provided by Vanderbilt Divinity School at

https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/slides/Ax_SixthSundayafterEpiphany.pdf

ⁱⁱ Read their story here <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/ccn/read-our-story/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Scott Hoezee, Sermon Starters, Gospel Lectionary, Matthew 5:21-37. These examples adapted from cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-6a-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

^{iv} Adapted from James Howell, *James Howell's Weekly Preaching Notions*, "What can we say about February 16?" <http://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/2019/01/>

^v Hoezee.