

2023 02 12 – Walking God’s Way

Scripture: Matthew 5:17-37 (The Inclusive Bible)

This is a challenging scripture to listen to and even more difficult passage to read. Many of the words attributed to Jesus in this passage make little sense and may even be offensive to those of us who live in the 21st Century. Let’s just put a few of those words out on the table so we know what we are talking about:

- “Anyone who says to sister or brother ‘I spit in your face!’ will be subject to the Sanhedrin; and anyone who vilifies them with name-calling will be subject to the fires of Gehenna.” Did Jesus really say that we are going to stand in front of a group of judges or even burn in hell because we lost our temper and were rude to someone? I doubt it.
- “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away!” This is obviously a figure of speech, a hyperbole, and should never be taken literally.
- “Everyone who divorces—except because of adultery—forces the spouse to commit adultery. Those who marry the divorced also commit adultery.” This is certainly not the understanding of the laws of our land and it is definitely not the understanding of our church.

When I am faced with lectionary passages like this one, I am grateful that I do not belong to a denomination that believes in the infallibility of scripture. I can’t imagine preaching on this passage, if I had to agree with every word on the page.

I believe that the New Testament was written by men who followed Jesus with all their heart and soul and mind. I believe that what they wrote was inspired by their relationship with the Holy Mystery. But I also know that they were men living in a patriarchal society in an ancient Middle Eastern culture very different from our own. So I am not going to spend my time trying to defend every word they wrote, or trying to make their understanding of the world fit into today's North American culture.

But I am interested in the underlying wisdom of this passage. First, I want to look at the concept of law. Jesus was, of course, Jewish. He followed the laws of the Torah, the laws that we find in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. These are the ancient laws of the Jewish people. They include the Ten Commandments that Moses received from God while standing on Mt. Sinai. They also include many laws associated with the rituals of their faith and the workings of their society. We know that Jesus was a learned scholar and that he knew the laws of his people.

We also know that Jesus got into trouble with the keepers of the law, the Pharisees, because he sometimes broke the laws of the Torah. Do you remember some of the ways that he broke the law? (wait for answers: healing on the Sabbath, picking grain on the Sabbath, speaking to a Samaritan women, eating with prostitutes & tax collectors). Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust." Martin

Luther King Jr. was, of course, speaking about the laws of the 1960's, the laws that perpetuated systemic racism here in North America. I believe that Martin Luther King Jr. was following in Jesus' way, in God's way, when he spoke and lived out those words.

Later on in this same Gospel, when the Pharisees asked Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment of the Law is the greatest?" Jesus answered, 'You must love the Most High God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' That is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: 'You must love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments the whole Law is based—and the Prophets as well." (Matthew 22:36-40)

Jesus believed in laws that were based on love and compassion. He believed that the Jewish laws of his time were generally based on that premise. But I doubt that he would have ever told his followers, "whoever breaks the least significant of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven." We know that he broke some of those laws himself. Instead, Jesus probably told his followers to view every law or commandment in the light of love and justice and to choose their path accordingly. Jesus could very well have said, "Whoever breaks a just law or follows an unjust law and thus harms himself or his neighbour will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven."

In today's Moment for Reflection, I used the first two verses from Psalm 119. This psalm is also included in the lectionary, the suggested scriptures, for this Sunday. The ancient psalmist wrote:

“Happiness comes to those whose way is blameless,
who walk in your Law, YHWH.
Happiness comes to those who keep your decrees,
and seek you with all their heart,
and do no wrong, but walk in your ways.”

We are all called to walk in God's way, to walk in Jesus' way. But walking in God's way means more than just keeping the letter of the law. It means living out God's love in the world.

I believe that Jesus could have said many of things in this passage from the Gospel of Matthew. I believe Jesus wants us to go beyond the commandment “do not kill” and expects us to treat our friends and even our enemies with love and respect. I believe that he wants us to work out our problems with our neighbours without having to go to court. I believe he wants us to be faithful to our spouses and partners and to speak the truth even when we haven't sworn an oath or put our hand on a Bible.

But I also know that there are times when divorce is the best solution. When it is the way of truth and love and justice. Despite all the words that get said in a wedding ceremony, not all marriages are meant to last. Certainly not the ones

where abuse is present. I also believe that our society is beyond the premise that it is better to stay together 'for the sake of the children.'

I also know that none of us are perfect and no matter how hard we try we will make mistakes. We will speak out of anger and say things that are hurtful to others. We will allow arguments to get to a point where mediation or even court is the only option. We will struggle to always tell the truth.

So the good news is that our God is a God of love, of unconditional and everlasting love. Our God is a God of grace, of mercy. So mistakes, both small and large are not necessarily going to lead us to the fires of Gehenna. In fact, I believe that hell is a place here on earth that we create for ourselves. Instead, we have the option of asking God and our fellow human beings for forgiveness. We have the option of facing our demons and moving beyond our mistakes.

Walking God's way, following God's law, is about living our lives with love and compassion for others and for ourselves. It is about following the laws of our society and our church with open hearts and minds. It is about living a life of peace and justice, a life that will bring us closer to God's kingdom of heaven on earth. May it be so. Amen.