

## The Heart of the Matter

Texts: Matthew 5:21-37, Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Julie Emery

At Larchmont Avenue Church

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*Matthew 5:21-37 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; 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.*

*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.*

*Come to terms quickly with your accuser while your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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. 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.*

*“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

*“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.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make on hair white or black. let your word be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”*

Moses stands with the Israelites on the precipice of the promised land. They have spent 40 years wandering in the desert and finally they have arrived. Moses has led them, he has suffered their critique and complaints, he has given them God's law, and now on the brink of all that he has hoped for, he is denied entrance. Deeply grieved and yet somehow resigned to God's decision, Moses gives his final sermon, his last speech.

"I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away... you will not live long in that land..."

"Choose life," he says, "so that you and your descendants shall live..." Obey the law, he says, follow the Lord's commandments and walk in his ways... and you will live and prosper. Choose life, he says, because any other way is a way of death.

When Jesus stands on his own mountaintop he addresses a crowd of people who have been trying to do just that - to choose life, trying to obey those commandments and follow the Lord. Jesus invokes that same law which Moses handed down and pushes it beyond its traditional interpretation. I have come not to abolish the law but fulfill, Jesus says and then begins to expound upon what it means to move from living the letter of the law to the heart of it.

Over the course of the last few weeks we have heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: those beloved beatitudes, when Jesus expounds on the wideness of God's grace and mercy, naming those who are blessed: the meek, the poor in spirit, the peacemakers... and you - you who are persecuted for my sake. As Reverend Crawford illuminated last week, he names his hearers as the salt of the earth, as the light of the world - called to flavor, to preserve, to illumine the kingdom of heaven on earth.

But then Jesus keeps talking. He begins to speak more specifically about what it looks like to be salt and light. He begins to name specific laws that his community would have known and obeyed. And he begins to show them the difference between following the law and fulfilling it, the difference between obeying a law and living out the heart of that law every day. And in so doing he lifts up some of the most challenging aspects of our lives together in Christian community: anger, lust, covenant, and truth-telling.

Anne Lamott tells a story in her book on Christian Faith, 'Traveling Mercies' about her relationship with the mother of a classmate of her son, Sam.<sup>1</sup> The woman was one of those women who rubbed Lamott all the wrong ways - she seemed too perfect, too put together. She was athletic and showed up to volunteer in the school their sons attended in her bike shorts. She seemed overly organized and able to read all of the hundreds of communications that came from the school, which, Lamott admits, seemed a little "show-offy." But the thing that pushed Lamott over the edge was when this woman seemed to be a bit too interested in her son Sam's reading level, which was below her own son's natural ability.

At first the woman seemed as though she was trying to be helpful, passing down easy reader books to Sam. It was condescending but not yet mean. But then she asked for a copy of one of Lamott's book, and read that Lamott was far on the other side of the political fence. So the day she passed by Lamott in the grocery store and said, "I read your book..." and then winked and said something cute like, "I guess it's a good thing he *can't* read so well."

And that was when Lamott gave over to her anger. She said, in her biting way, she thought such awful thoughts that she could even say them out loud because they would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish. She called her friends to say awful things about her enemy. She stewed in her anger and disgust. But then she says, she also felt disgusting. She said living in that anger became a little like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.

In the end it was the boys who brought their mothers together, as kids tend to do. Sam was at the other boy's house for a playdate, and his mother asked Lamott in, offered her some tea and baked goods, and extended hospitality. It was there in the face of the kindness of her enemy, that Lamott recognized the poison that had been coursing through her; Saw that the anger belonged only to her, and had tainted any possibility of a good relationship between them. It was there she saw that God cares not only about how we treat each other, but also what we think about each other. That God cares very much about the inner workings of our hearts.

If anger is difficult to negotiate, then how much more is lust? And if it was difficult in the ancient world, I can only imagine what Jesus might say about our world today. With the constant barrage of images on cable TV and the internet, is it even possible for us to avoid a lustful look? A recent issue of New York Magazine surveyed the ways in which internet pornography is changing the very basic nature of relationships from

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<sup>1</sup> Lamott, Anne Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith, Random House Books 1999

teenagers through adults.<sup>2</sup> In one article, teenage girls shared the ways in which the constant access to sexual images has already affected the ways in which they relate to boys and vice versa.

The article claims that the average age of first exposure to internet porn is widely cited as age 11. "It's pretty much intensely available," one 13 year old boy said. The girls knew to be wary of strangers on the internet, they knew how to protect themselves against both predators and their parents, but what they didn't quite know how to deal with was the ways in which that constant access was changing the boys they hoped to someday date. "Guys wouldn't know about all that stuff if it weren't for the internet," said one teenage girl, "It sort of freaks them out..." It changes them, the girls revealed, it makes them expect things that are perhaps out of the ordinary, and makes them less interested in the very real, very normal girls in front of them.

For all the anxiety this causes us as parents and caregivers, perhaps the answer is not (as it might seem on first impulse) to ban our children from ever using the internet again, to closet ourselves away from our wider culture, to avoid the images and thus avoid the emotions. Certainly, that didn't work for the disciples to whom Jesus spoke. Anger and lust are a part of the human emotional landscape. Anger is a natural response to being wronged, and if we live in this world among other people we will be wronged sooner or later. Lust is a part of desire, and desire is at least in part what fuels us to be better human beings.

What's more if we listen closely, Jesus doesn't ask us to avoid the things that bring up in us anger or lust. He doesn't tell us to avoid one another and so avoid those very difficult emotions. He warns us about the destructive nature of them, and asks us to choose a better way.

Preacher and scholar Tom Long points out that these admonitions of Jesus are hyperbole, since it is ludicrous to imagine that Jesus really expected we should rip out eyes or tear off limbs, or we should actually walk out in the middle of a religious service and go hunting for a person with whom we might have a disagreement.

Instead, these extreme examples point to the essential, powerful, nature of right relationships, and what it might mean to strive for higher righteousness. The language Jesus uses demonstrates just how precious, how treasured the kingdom of heaven is so that nothing, not even thoughts, should keep us from participation in it. As Biblical

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Morris, 'They Know What Boys Want' New York Magazine, (February 7, 2011)

Scholar Margaret Aymer puts it, "Our commitment to living the ethical life of Jesus should be stronger than our attachment to even our own body."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps this is at least in part what it means to be salty, what it means to actually live as a light to the world; To live so that all aspects of our lives are subject to God's grace and judgement. "Jesus speaks of people's basic attitudes and emotions - the choices we make about what we allow to take root in our imaginations, to shape our thoughts, to govern our actions, and to mold our relationships."

It is relationships that concerns Jesus most here, it seems, and the ways in which we treat and sometimes abuse one another. This indeed is layered beneath his words about divorce, which we must be careful to note was very different from our experience of divorce today. As with his words on anger and lust, Jesus lifts up the widely understood Jewish law: that if a man wants to divorce his wife he needs only to present her with divorce papers. This law was initially a protection for women, as only men had the power to divorce, and could dismiss their wives at any time for any reason. Divorce papers would give a divorcee a way to show that she was still virtuous, and allow her to honorably re-marry.

And yet, in practice, it seems, it became a way for men to do what they pleased when they pleased. Divorce was tantamount to abandonment. It was, in essence, to treat her as worthless. In response to this practice, Jesus leaves no room for trivializing the covenant made in a faithful marriage. He makes culpable all who participate in the disrespect of the covenantal relationship, and in doing so extends the law to protect a wife and her children from being abandoned for little or no reason.

Abandonment like this is rarely the case in our current context. More often, the choice to separate is painful and full of grief, but may sometimes be the only way towards a path of mutual respect and love for both involved. We affirm both the sacredness of the marriage covenant and the very personal and unique story of each married couple. Divorce is a part of our culture and brings deep sorrow for all those involved, and yet the grace of God extends beyond our imaginations as we affirm that nothing can separate us from God's love, and God leads us to choose Life for ourselves and our loved ones, again and again despite our human failings.

If we are to look for the essential truth of Christ's words, what we hear is the way in which he presses us to relate to one another. In the context of anger, lust, and his words on divorce and swearing oaths, we are given a way of Life which values each person we meet as blessed in the eyes of God. We are urged to love and be loving, to the point that

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Aymer has been blogging on the Gospel of Matthew at <http://mayog.posterous.com>

that love might even be inconvenient, to the point that it may even mean that that love might be more important than our own self preservation.

Moses says, I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life so that you and your descendants might live fully the life that God has planned for you. Choosing life isn't some abstract set of beliefs but instead a very concrete path through the very real and sometimes painful dynamics of being human. Since being human includes all the ways we must learn to live together, all the ways we must learn to navigate relationships of all sorts, and the ways we strive to do that in love.

For Jesus choosing life means that there is no room for us to harbor anger toward one another, it means there is no space for looking at another human being as if you should own them, it means that when you commit to someone you should honor that commitment with your whole self, not only with your actions but also with your thoughts, it means that your word should be true: that your yes should be yes and your no no and that is enough. It means that love and respect should dominate all your relationships, from stranger to spouse, from neighbor to friend.

The good news is that none of us has to navigate this alone. We live in community as Christians precisely because the Christian life is so challenging. We need support, we need encouragement, we need to help keep each other honest and loving, we need to be reminded of who we are and whose we are. We do this by sharing our lives, even our failings. We do this by inviting a person like Dr. Kate Ott to help us find ways to engage our kids in discussions about relationships, sexuality, and seeing the image of God in one another. We do this by living out our lives as Christians, together, and when we get it wrong forgiving each other and trying again.

Many of us have been watching with awe and anticipation the protests that have been taking place in Egypt. Egypt has been a place where for so long following the letter of the law has been a far cry from living out the heart of it. When the protesters took to the streets they had in their minds hope for a greater righteousness, a better way than the life they had been given.

Part of what captivated was their ability to gather in such large numbers in relative non-violence, creating a community of the people unified in cause and ideology. Living with tens of thousands on the streets was surely not completely devoid of those emotions that Jesus names in our text, but instead of allowing those emotions to take root, the protesters instead chose life, they lived out love for one another, they chose the better way.

Perhaps you read in the Daily News how "On Friday, the holy day for Islam, Christian protesters in Tahrir Square joined hands to form a protective cordon around their Muslim countrymen so they could pray in safety.<sup>4</sup> And then on Sunday, the Muslims returned the favor. They surrounded Christians celebrating Mass in Cairo's central plaza, ground zero for the secular pro-democracy protests reverberating throughout the Middle East.

"In the name of Jesus and Muhammed, we unify our ranks," the Rev. Ihab al-Kharat told the crowd in his sermon... Afterward, the crowd of both Muslims and Christians chanted "one hand" - meaning "we are one" - and held up a Koran and a cross.

Perhaps you read how that in the midst of the whirlwind on the streets of Cairo, Dr. Ahmad Zaafan and his fiancée, Oula Abdul Hamid, who had been camping in the square for 10 days, pledged their lives together in marriage. "It was like having 300,000 guests," they said.

Maybe they were just swept up in the moment. Maybe they were just giddy with love. But maybe they saw the life that was possible for them - one of love and justice, one of salt and light, one that chooses Life in every moment of every day.

May each of us get swept up in that kind of Love. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2011/02/07/2011-02-07\\_muslims\\_turn\\_out\\_in\\_mass.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2011/02/07/2011-02-07_muslims_turn_out_in_mass.html)