

This Time It's Serious (16Feb2020)  
Matt5:21-37

*[Jesus continued in the Sermon on the Mount:]  
“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders will deserve judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a sibling, you will deserve judgment; and if you call a sibling ‘You fool,’ you will have to answer to the Sanhedrin; and if you call a sibling a moron you will deserve the Valley of Slaughter. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you suspect that your sibling has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your sibling, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court, or 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.*

We're breaking apart this reading. This is one segment of a longer section in the Sermon on the Mount with the repeated formula where Jesus declares, “You've heard it said...but I say to you.” Today we hear four of the six (and unfortunately miss my favorite two, about turning the other cheek and loving enemies).

The four we do hear move through big topics, and it seemed like it would be worth holding them a bit at a time.

Each of these sections take what could be easy morality or conventional religious practice and Jesus makes us hold it much more intentionally. This time it's serious, to make us examine our commitment in relationships instead of falling back to simple self-satisfaction while feeling all self-justified.

Starting with a chunk around the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, we would have lazy capacity to say, “I'm doing just fine, since I haven't murdered a single person today!” We might start to think that only serial killers and homicidal maniacs are the ones breaking the Commandment, but that's

pretty limited applicability. The Commandment becomes practically worthless if we could ignore or disregard it so much.

So Jesus says if you're angry or nasty to others, that is as bad as murder. With rhetorical flourish, he exaggerates to make a point, that if you call somebody names, you might as well go to hell.

He amps it up so much in concern for wellbeing in relationship, going so far as even if you *think* somebody may have something against you. There are stories with this verse of people not taking communion because of a yet-to-be-reconciled grudge. Remarkably, Jesus says how we relate to each other even precedes how we relate to God.

Martin Luther did something similar with the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment in his Small Catechism, in saying that not murdering means “we are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.”

You may not have committed murder. But if somebody was left homeless in the cold, or if they could use better health care, or if a better salary would give them more life (and how can we argue for a minimum wage, which is akin to saying What's the least I can murder someone?), or if failing to offer a compliment or listening ear diminishes instead of accentuates life, well...

*“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 body part than for your whole body to be thrown into the Valley of Slaughter. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one body part than for your whole body to go to the Valley of Slaughter.*

*“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 for reasons of sexual irregularity, causes her to*

*commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

We'll take these two pieces together, since in both of them we should hear that Jesus isn't imposing some prudish morality, but commending relationships, with women as real participants, against objectifying them, treating them as property, where men can possess or get rid of them.

See, in the old version, the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment against adultery was about a man not taking his neighbor's wife, causing risk that offspring wouldn't be his own. It wasn't mutual, but very much patriarchal. Men were the ones who committed adultery, and they committed it against other men.

Similarly, only men could get a divorce, which, like throwing an old piece of furniture to the curb in the trash, divorce was disposing of property a man didn't want anymore. Jesus won't stand for that view. He insists that a husband needs to honor the relationship, the humanity of his wife.

The old form of just handing a wife a certificate of divorce precisely ignores the complexity of emotion and wellbeing, just as we understand the complexity of divorce, for the integrity and humanity of the people in the relationship.

Although our culture has come a long way in the place of women (as well as those outside the gender binary), with these words from Jesus, we can't pat ourselves too quickly on the back. The need of #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements shows that neither secular culture nor religious institutions have done enough, that men still are committing acts of violent and abusive power. In phrases like "she dressed to deserve it" or "boys will be boys" and when conversation is so instantly about how a woman looks, about appearance and about body shape, we remain a horrible, awful long way from the good Jesus intends, for how we should be looking at each other as full people in the variety of our relationships, not trying to possess or control each

other, relating not as objects to be dominated or dispossessed but as subjects fully with each other.

Again, with overstatement Jesus says our relationships are so important that—particularly across gender power differentials—if you can't get it, pluck out your wandering eyeball, cut off your grabby hand. It would also be worth stating Jesus' version in the positive: practice being better in relationship. See value and identity. Reach out with care. Do whatever it takes for the good of each other, the good of what it means to be connected also to God.

*"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 God's footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."*

This one may seem like a relief, that we're not talking about sex and gender anymore. But it may also be especially relevant these days.

This guidance from Jesus on swearing is sure not about cussing and a potty mouth. Around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment, of not misusing God's name, it's not even exactly for taking it in vain by saying Omigod as an expression or for Chrissakes to curse. It's more saying, "I swear to God." Jesus is against that, because it manipulates God's goodness for your purposes of coercion.

It was in the "Just Mercy" movie some of us saw last weekend, where a witness in a trial puts a hand on the Bible and is asked, "do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

It also hits national politics. Though our news cycle moves at the speed to make it an unretainable blur, I waited a week to talk about Mitt Romney.

As the Sermon on the Mount has been about

taking the risk to live faith, to live it in the face of empire, to accept the challenge that it means to trust God most highly, there's something powerful that Senator Romney explained he is very serious about his religion that his standing with God outweighed whatever political repercussions would come from breaking ranks to vote against President Trump. Certainly I wish that it wouldn't have been the Mormon, but that ELCA member Joni Ernst or Christians would've taken their relationship with God so seriously that it overcame other partisan or ideological loyalty or convenience.

And yet, even while commending the integrity of Senator Romney's devotion, with these words from Jesus, we should perhaps observe that the oath is a bad idea. That we would have to manipulate our elected leaders to tell the truth and be honest is disappointing to begin with, much less that it didn't work and ended up treading God underfoot, turning God and faith into a political tool.

What Jesus indicates is that we should be able to be honest enough that we don't have to swear. Yes means yes. No means no. How can we be the sort of people who live this way?

As Phil Haslanger pointed out this week in a Cap Times column related to the next part of the Sermon on the Mount, "Not everyone in this country would define themselves as Christians, but for those of us who do, the burden is on us to find a better way to act."<sup>\*</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> [https://madison.com/ct/opinion/column/phil-haslanger-loving-your-enemies-is-a-challenge-but-it/article\\_57ef6112-5f20-5ab5-b276-63687c137894.html](https://madison.com/ct/opinion/column/phil-haslanger-loving-your-enemies-is-a-challenge-but-it/article_57ef6112-5f20-5ab5-b276-63687c137894.html)