

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany/Year A  
February 12, 2017  
Text: Matthew 5:21-37

Last week in our Gospel reading, Jesus said, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished... I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Today, we heard a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The passage is part of what scholars call, “the hard sayings of Jesus.” Indeed. What Jesus says this morning is hard to hear, hard to preach, and even harder to live. So what happened? Only two weeks ago Jesus gave us a summary of blessings. Last week, Jesus told his listeners, “You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world!”

In today's reading Jesus presents four well known laws or commandments and seems to up the bar in every case. “You have heard it said,” Jesus begins and then he says, “But I tell you...I say to you.” And each has a serious consequence! So where will we find the Good News in this gospel???

On the surface we may think: Okay. I haven't killed anyone. I have been faithful. Those who have been through divorce? There was a good reason for that. And you know, using four-letter words are just not part of my vocabulary and if they are; they are just words.

But as Mama Odie said to Tiana and Prince Levin in ‘The Princess and the Frog’: “You gotta dig a little deeper.” And that is precisely what Jesus does and that is what he asks of his followers. We are to look deeper, deeper into our hearts and harder into the faces we see in the mirror, and then look beyond ourselves. Jesus gives us a sort of framework by which we are to stretch our understanding of God's commandments, and better live out our lives together more grace-filled, peace-filled, Christ-like, and with love. The “righteousness” that Jesus speaks of is not just a matter of following rules but of honoring relationships.

And so Jesus instructs us.

*The law says do not murder; I say do not even get angry.* There are many ways to “kill” a person. Hate kills and so does gossiping, ruining someone else’s reputation, discriminating, neglecting and treating others as if they were a disease, the scum of the earth. And unless one is truly a saint, what did we call the driver who cut us off on the road or highway just the other day? What were we thinking when someone took up a little too much time at the drive up ATM? Did our words discourage someone or offer hope? The righteousness that we are to embrace is to love others as we would have them love us, even our enemies, to be reconciled one to the other.

*The law says no to adultery; I say do not even look at someone in lust.* Jesus knows that even if we keep the commandment not to commit adultery there are others ways to be unfaithful even from a distance. That lustful glance. The desire to take what is not ours to take. Or maybe we only associate ourselves with someone only because of what they can do for us. We can be so overly committed to a task or job that we forget lives and relationships matter be it a spouse, partner, child, or friend. We are called to faithfulness without pretense at every turn.

*The law says here is how you are to divorce; I say do not divorce and do not marry someone who is divorced.* And this is a difficult one because we all know people who are divorced. Back in Jesus’ day a man could divorce a woman for something as frivolous as being late putting a meal on the table. Or the husband did not have to have any excuse at all. We know that our social context and Church teachings have evolved and there are exceptions like physical, mental, and verbal abuse, domestic violence, addictions, and when a marriage or union is no longer what is was intended to be. Jesus’s command about divorce can certainly extend beyond two people in how individuals live together in relationship and as a community. In Christ’s Body there is no room for backbiting or discord. God wants nothing more for God’s children than life in unity and happiness.

*The law says do not swear falsely; I say do not swear at all. It is either yes or no.* Need we say more? Even if we can keep from swearing falsely, there is no room for manipulating or hurting others with our words. Say what you mean in truth and in Christ’s love. Be true to your words.

Given the way we have evolved in our thinking today, we may feel we can do without the weight of ‘thou shalt not’s’ and rules. Or we feel that we can bend the rules to our liking or throw our hands up in defeat. But we must remember

why God's commandments and laws were given in the first place. According to what we heard in our passage from Deuteronomy, God gave humankind the law as gift, a Valentine's Day gift of sorts, to help God's people live into life more fully. God said, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..." God's law was also given to strengthen community, community where everyone can find safety, nurture, and blessing. Life is not just about our own individuality. No man or woman is an island as the saying goes. So life is also about being part of a community that together faces all the setbacks and challenges the world presents every day. And God's law was given to help us to be other centered, to be attuned to the needs of others. God's commandments were not given to make us live in fear of God but to make us people fit for God's kingdom now and in the life to come.

We are called to remember the words of Jesus today. He came, not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He came, to make disciples and to show them and us how we might love God and one another in community more deeply; with all of our mind, heart, and soul. As one writer put it, "...it is not just a matter of actions, but of heart as well. It is not enough to keep back your hand from violence, but unjustified anger and rage are not acceptable either; it is not enough to keep from infidelity, one must guard the heart as well."\*

At the end of the day each of us must ask ourselves:

*"Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love?"*

Henri Nouwen

I would like to end by sharing a prayer that I found this week. It was written by one of my seminary classmates. I hope that it speaks to you as it does to me.

*God, give us strength to live another day.  
Let us not turn coward before its difficulties  
or prove recreant to its duties.  
Let us not lose faith in our fellow human beings.  
Keep us sound of heart  
in spite of ingratitude, treachery, or meanness.  
Preserve us from minding little stings or giving them.  
Help us to keep our hearts clean,  
and to live so honestly and fearlessly  
that no outward failure can dishearten us*

*or take away the joy of conscious integrity.  
Open wide the eyes of our souls  
that we may see good in all things.  
Grant us this day some new vision of your truth,  
inspire us with the joy and gladness  
and make us the cup of strength to suffering souls,  
in the name of the strong Deliverer,  
our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*(Prayer written by The Rev. Dr. Kris Lewis-Theerman)*

\*quote taken from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Russell Levenson, Jr.-‘Living Happily Ever After’,  
for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, February 12, 2017