

February 12, 2017
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 5:21-37

THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS?

A cynical old preacher near the end of his career once said: **“People don't come to church to hear stuff that goes against their prejudices. People come to church to be stroked, to be confirmed in what they have always thought.”**

This cranky old guy was saying that church people by and large have made up their minds about what the Bible says and what it means for them. Their standards and their model for living are rooted in those pre-conceived ideas (prejudices) and they expect the preacher to tell them that they are right. They want to go out with that feel good feeling of affirmation. They don't want to go out feeling that their understanding has been challenged or called into question. Well of course nobody wants that. But this old guy was particularly burnt out and critical. That you don't want to leave worship depressed, doesn't necessarily mean you're a closed minded, hard-hearted curmudgeon.

A not quite as old, much wiser and much less cynical preacher once said to me: “Parish ministry is hard work, preaching every Sunday is really hard work, but do not ever stand up in front of your congregation looking for sympathy. Preaching the Word of God is a privilege and a blessing.” Actually, I did not need to be told that. I knew it then and I know it now. To be given the opportunity to study and preach God's word is a joy and an honor of which I am still in awe all these many years later. I thank God for you all every day for the privilege of serving in this place at this time.

I hope I never sound like I'm complaining. But this passage challenges me and my own preconceived ideas about the Good News of Jesus Christ. I really do

want people to leave feeling positive and uplifted. But really Jesus this is hard to take. Hear this passage from the sermon on the mount.

You have heard it said, “Christianity makes sense. Your life will be better if you sign on with Jesus.” But I say to you that if you listen to Jesus here, and take him seriously, then you are going to find that he makes your life more complicated, even more difficult. You have heard it said, “It’s important to try to be compassionate and caring toward those in need, but sometimes you have to be realistic, you have to be practical.” But I say to you that’s not what Jesus says. Judging from the sermon on the mount, Jesus appears to have little interest in being practical or realistic about how people are supposed to deal with each other on this planet.

Anger is tantamount to murder? That can’t be. Lust in the heart is the equivalent of actually committing adultery? No way.

Most of the time, most of us, myself included, are going to hear Jesus say anger and murder are equivalent, as are lust and adultery, and we’re just going to say, well that can’t be what he means, and leave it at that. But we can’t leave it at that because Jesus would not have said these things if he didn’t have some very important reason for saying them.

Have you ever heard the expression “no harm, no foul?” It was very popular among lawyers when I was practicing law. It’s a twist on a basketball analogy. In basketball, if you foul someone you are penalized even if the foul had no direct consequences like causing an injury or preventing a score. But in the legal world it’s different. Suppose you have an obligation to provide your opponent with evidence about your case before trial starts and you miss a deadline or you don’t disclose something that you were supposed to.

Then your opponent asks the judge to impose some kind of penalty. With all kinds of arrogance that lawyers just seem to develop by osmosis, the offending

party, the one who failed to follow the rules would stand up and say: “Hey, here is all the stuff you were supposed to get. It doesn’t matter that it is late. No harm no foul.” It usually worked in the courtroom. But I will tell you that inside the law firm, when a younger, less experienced lawyer is confronted by the boss with committing some kind of violation of the rules of court, he better not shrug and say “no harm, no foul” unless he wants to find himself cleaning out his office that afternoon.

People say, how can lust in your heart be as bad as actually committing the adultery. If no one knows about it, no one is hurt by it, what is the harm? No harm, no foul. Anger that is just seething beneath the surface is the same thing. If I am really angry with someone, but I can keep it to myself, I can speak to them with civility when I see them and pretend nothing is wrong, where is the harm? And actually, let’s take that one step farther. If I am sick and tired of the way our government works, or doesn’t work, why shouldn’t I just plaster Facebook and twitter with accusations and alternative facts that fit my preconceived ideas about what is right, what is true. It’s not like murder. It isn’t going to actually hurt anybody. Or, when I hear someone affirming my own feelings of anger and frustration shouldn’t I cheer and encourage them and share it on Facebook with cynical criticism devoid of fact-checks. It’s a free country. I am just exercising my right to free speech. I’m not hurting anyone. No harm, no foul, right?

Not. Says Jesus. That is not good enough. Jesus demands that we make our inner feelings match his way. It’s the same message we heard over the last couple of weeks from the Old Testament prophets. God is more interested in what is in your heart than outward appearances of following the rules. And for good reason.

The reason adultery is against God’s commandment is because it destroys God’s purpose for marriage. Marriage, according to God’s plan, is a microcosm of Kingdom living where all people will live in mutuality and respect for each other.

Adultery destroys the mutuality in the marriage relationship that is based on trust. And the truth is, that mutuality is in fact equally undermined if one person in the relationship is lusting after someone, or something, else. It really doesn't matter if we are talking about lusting after a person, or lusting after power, or lusting after wealth. Lust displaces the regard and the mutuality that is the foundation for the marriage relationship.

Lust or anger directed at another person, even if it is never acted on, is counter to Kingdom living because we cannot say on the one hand that we are all created in the image of God and on the other hand view our brothers and sisters as objects—be it objects of desire or objects of hate. Even if we never act on those feelings, if we are carrying that baggage in our hearts, it will contaminate every aspect of our relationship with God, with family and friends and with the world.

So, it does matter. There may be times when no harm no foul is a valid defense. But not in a basketball game, and not in the life of a Christian, because there is harm when Christians who claim to seek the Kingdom of God, do not trust God enough to truly believe that we are all brothers and sisters created in his image.

It is sin and it does matter. But we are not lost because of it. In commenting on the difficult sayings of Jesus in this passage, Martin Luther said that Jesus does not in fact expect us to be able always to control emotions that aren't controllable or even to behave differently. Rather, according to Luther, Jesus intended to drive all of us into the arms of a merciful God. No one can live lives of such perfection although we all know that we should. But we don't have to let it weigh us down when we give in to emotions that are the antithesis of life in Christ because we are forgiven, saved by his grace.

That is the Good News of salvation. That is why we can leave worship this morning feeling good; feeling affirmed. Because of the undeserved, freely given

grace of Jesus Christ, we are reconciled with God even though we all fall short of living into his vision of the Kingdom. And by that grace we are not left alone, dependent on our own devices to overcome our failures. When we come to worship with our minds and ears and our hearts open to the Word of God, we find Christ within us and in the person sitting next to us, and realize that Christ is equally within that person and our neighbors across the street, our neighbor down on the south side, and neighbor around the world. Then Christ works in us and through us so that reconciliation happens. Lust and anger dissipate. Christ does it for us because we can't do it on our own. That is the good news.