

Matthew 5:21-37, 2014

In our confession today we will admit that we are not at peace with one another, we are in conflict with one another and we will call on God to not only forgive, but change our hearts.

This is part of what we do each time we gather for worship.

After the reading of this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, you may feel a little overwhelmed by your need for confession and forgiveness.

You remember last week Jesus said

¹⁷"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For 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.

This week Jesus does not eliminate the law, but expands the meaning of the commandments He talks about. He sets the standard of life for those who choose to follow Him.

This passage, and the one you will hear next week, are focused on the law and exclude any kind of gospel message, good news.

At the pre-lenten retreat I attended this week our leader Susan Briehl grieved for pastors who had to preach on these passages this week and next for just that reason, and suggested that in our preparation we take time to consider where this passage may leave you in your hearing it.

Where does it leave you when you hear that you shall not murder.

means you will not insult, or call anyone a fool or stupid or a moron, for if you do you are guilty of murder.

You will have killed a relationship.

How does that fit in with you memory of your last week?

Susan suggested that we consider where it leaves you when Jesus says don't make your offering at the altar until you have reconciled with your brother or sister who accuses you.

That one brings us back to our confession that we are not at peace with one another.

Who in your life do you need to make amends with before you bring your sacrifice to the altar?

Or you shall not commit adultery.

Even if your eye looks at another person with lust you have committed adultery.

If you are going to look or touch it would be better to pluck out your eye, or cut off your hand.

Most people think Jesus is exaggerating here just to make His point, but....

We don't see too many people walking around these days with one eye and one hand because they were tempted to look at another person with lust in their heart.

After all, Jimmy Carter who during his presidential campaign admitted to lusting in his heart, and referred to this very passage, still had both eyes and hands.

Yet Jesus makes the point as he sets the standard of life for his disciples.

Susan asked us to consider how this passage is heard by all those who are divorced, remarried, and even those who are bound in a marriage that is abusive;

Where eyes are blackened, bones broken, spirits trampled into non-existence.

Where the emotional abuse strips away any sense of identity the abuse victim may have had.

Is there no way out for them?

How is this passage heard by those who have lied, slanted the truth, passed along bad information, or sworn to something, true or false, in the name of God or any of His creation, or just gossiped?

Jesus' message sounds harsh, it sets the bar higher than you can reach and can leave you without any hope.

Can that be what Jesus wants, to leave you hopeless?

Lets go back to our lesson from Deuteronomy for today.

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God... then you shall live...¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear...¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish...¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days..."

Wherever this Gospel reading leaves you, God gives the promise of life along with the commandments. That is God's purpose in giving the commandments.

God knows what destroys life and He wants better than that for His people.

Choose life, not death.

You know how much trouble you are in given Jesus' interpretation of the rules for life.

Given all that, how hard it is O Lord to obey every day, all the time.

Has our Gospel lesson left you without hope? Is your situation hopeless?

Wherever the gospel lesson for today has left you I invite you to bring your heart and mind into this time God has given us;

time to worship, time to hear His word, time to give thanks, time to make our confession, time to be forgiven and healed, time to sing God's praises.

This is the moment and the place that breaks down the barriers between us and God built on our sin.

This is the occasion that reignites life, hope and love.

We confess today that we are not at peace with one another, that we are in conflict with one another and with God, and come to this altar where through bread and wine, through Christ's death and resurrection, you receive forgiveness and the impossible becomes possible.

You can live the new life given in the forgiveness God gives you, and you can forgive one another.

When you come to the table offering your very life to God who takes it, makes it holy and gives it back to you in the presence of the living Christ

you don't have to do it on your own any longer.

Coming here you chose life not death.

Amen