

## A Matter of the Heart, the Heart of the Matter—6th Sunday After the Epiphany

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[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)

[Psalm 119:1-8](#)

[Matthew 5:21-37](#)

Heavy stuff today from Matthew's Gospel!

Some of you might remember that all the way back on the first Sunday of Advent, when we shifted to our new church calendar year, we also shifted to the Gospel of Matthew. And back in November I explained that the Gospel of Matthew is a bit severe.

So, firstly, as modern people, if we want to understand what is going on here, we really need to take into account some of the historical realities of both the culture of the Hebrew people and of when Jesus was preaching this message.

It was a sad reality that women did not enjoy the equality, freedom and personhood that they have now achieved, and still must continue to strive for, in our culture. Women then, tragically, were possessed by their families and then passed like slaves to their husbands.

And in an honor-shame culture like this, they were totally dependent upon their male-led families. If a woman were to be divorced, she would have been put into an impossible situation. She would no longer get any support from her former husband obviously. But she would be marked with a kind of sexual shame. And so, she would fall even further down to the bottom of the social ladder.

And so, Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is saying: "Hey! Don't allow that to happen to another human being, you selfish pigs!"

"Yes," Jesus says, "I know there is a provision in the Torah, in the Law of the Old Testament, that says you may dissolve your marriage for certain reasons, but selfishness is just selfishness."

I really don't believe Jesus is condemning divorce as we know it, nor is he saying that people ought to stay in abusive or unhealthy relationships, just because. In fact, it's the opposite.

Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus preaching the beatitudes, Jesus blessing the poor and meek. And then he goes on to tell us we are the light of the world. And then, we have all these sayings we've heard today. In a nutshell, Jesus is asking his followers to take the

Law, the commandments of God, very seriously. But not to take them seriously in observance only—do this, don't do that— But to take them seriously as a measure of God's love in us, as a matter of the heart.

The image of the "heart" comes up a lot in our other lessons. In Deuteronomy, Moses is giving a farewell speech of sorts, as the people are just about to cross into the land that was promised by God to their ancestor Abraham. And he says that if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away... then things won't go so well. And the Psalmist today says to God: Happy are they who observe your decrees/ and seek you with all their hearts.

Unlike divorce, the concept of the "heart" between Hebrew cultures and our own now is not different enough that we don't get the point. Heart here means: you, your truest, most inner self. "Heart" we sometimes think of as only our emotions, but we also say that we can get to the "heart" of the matter, or that we were "cut to the heart." The heart means the center, the core, the foundation.

And Jesus is not saying anything extravagantly different. He's saying you "know" the law, that you shouldn't kill, or go to bed with someone else's spouse. But he's challenging his audience, and us as well, He's asking: If you follow the law, is it from your heart, from love? Are you choosing not to hurt another, or take something for yourself because of the pain it would cause to others, or because it's what you think you should do?

This, I think, gets back to Moses' words as well, when he warns that there are very real "other gods" by which the Israelite people (and us as well) might be led astray—other gods we might bow down to and serve instead. I will say something bold and argue that these "other gods" have nothing to do with ancient religions, or modern religions either. These "other gods" are anything else in our lives, in our world, that tell us it is ok to hurt someone, or allow someone to be hurt, or to want something for ourselves despite the pain it would cause to others.

There are lots and lots of "other gods" like this in our culture: stability, money, success, beauty, seeming smart, being well-regarded, and on and on. And so, when Jesus says: 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. Jesus is addressing these "other gods." He is not talking about actually cutting off your right hand. Jesus is being cheeky! Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is saying: let's get to the root cause—let's get to the heart of the issue!

The word for hell here is an actual place name that refers to a garbage dump outside Jerusalem, called Gehenna. Jesus says, better to lose standing in your culture's eyes, better to be humbled, better to be inconvenienced than to throw yourself into the dump, away from God and God's loving intentions for you.

In Matthew's Gospel I don't think Jesus is saying: I want you to just follow the rules. When Jesus blesses the poor and the meek and those persecuted, when Jesus says that his followers are the light of the world, he says we mustn't follow the law for the law's sake, but he is saying that to follow him is to walk a path that will lead to radically loving others.

He's saying the law, like Moses says, is not a stairway to God, but it is a path to express the love that God has put into our hearts.

But, when we're honest with ourselves, isn't it so often the case that that kind of love just isn't there? And what is in our hearts is actually anger, and resentment, and so, lies and self-deception, and desires for things we cannot have? I think that's why Jesus' words today feel scary or annoying or unpleasant.

As I said, the law, as either Moses or Jesus explains it, isn't a stairway to God. But it's both a measuring stick and a lifelong pathway toward love. And more often than not, we don't measure up. We're not God, we're not Jesus. We are like the people in Deuteronomy.

Because if you know the Bible very well, then you know the people did not possess the land for ever. They were conquered, they were cast out, they didn't keep the law well. But if you know the Bible, you also know that God didn't quit. No matter how low we fall, or how low we think we've fallen, we never leave the pathway—we are never utterly forsaken—and God is always there to help us up, to direct our hearts toward love again.

The encouragement we need, the love we need, what we call God's Holy Spirit really does come along the path in so many real, tangible ways. From the water of our baptism, to encouraging words of Scripture, to the encouraging word of a friend (like Jeanette Harris!), or the promise of God's presence in the bread and wine of communion here.

All are reminders that we are in a process of letting The Holy Spirit direct our hearts toward love. There are ups and downs, but we are assured today what Jesus wants for us: to be, in our heart, reconciled with our human brothers and sisters, and to be reconciled with God.

*Amen.*