

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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It's Super Bowl Sunday and the weekend before Valentine's Day, but today's gospel reading doesn't pair well with chips, wings, and chocolates. Instead, we heard Jesus talk about murder, adultery, divorce, and empty promises. The gospel is a continuation from last week when Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount. This setting and the audience help us best understand how to receive Jesus' teachings.

Scholars note that Matthew's gospel is written for a Jewish community. It's written for religious insiders who are debating the identity of Jesus—either as the promised Messiah or a delusional heretic. Today's text put Jesus on a mountain to speak about the law that Moses received on Mt Sinai—as depicted in our stained-glass window. Matthew argues that Jesus is the new Moses who reinterprets the law to better reveal God's vision for the world.

Last week's gospel ended with how Jesus would reinterpret the law. He said, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). And the word “righteousness” is linked to justice, ethics, and Torah observance, that is observing the commands of the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. Now, here's the kicker, the Pharisees Jesus mentioned are Jewish individuals who looked at the Torah with a literalistic mindset. They worked to follow the Torah in a manner that was accurate to the written word but didn't always align with the broader intent. It is a classic example of following of the letter of the law while not always grasping the spirit of the law. To communicate what amplifying this righteousness looks like, Jesus gave four examples. The first example reflected on the command to not kill. The surface-level command probably has widespread agreement both for the original audience and those of us here today. Killing and murder are bad. But remember, Jesus said to *exceed* the righteousness of the Pharisees, so we need to bring the intent and the literal words into alignment. To do that is to understand the simple moral fact that words can kill. For anger, insults, and

mischaracterizations can affect death on our neighbors, whether intended or not. It's the casualty caused by our privilege and power. It's the slow erosion of the psyche of another because of social media. It's the way that murder is committed in ways far less physical.

Once Jesus brought up this first example, he took the conversation toward two of the more controversial and dare I say, political, topics of the day—divorce and adultery. You see, two of the most well-known rabbis of Jesus's time, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, were famously divided over the issue of divorce. Dr. Melanie Howard states that, "Hillel's school of thought favored a more permissive approach to divorce that allowed for divorce even in the case that a wife ruins her husband's meal. The school of Shammai, however, upheld a much stricter view that only permitted divorce in the most extreme cases."¹ Now, remember, that marriage in Jesus's time was not a formal recognition of love between two people who desire to spend their lives together. Rather, the primary purpose of marriage in Jesus's time was to create a household, which was the fundamental economic unit and the way to preserve the family. While Jesus will be asked point-blank about divorce later in Matthew's gospel, here Jesus noted the importance of the relationship. Jesus said that divorce should not be used as a cover for selfishness and whim while pretending that it is righteous because it's "legal."

After all, there is a time and a place for the end of a relationship and divorce, Jesus reminded us that understanding and love must be a part of the process. And this was a big deal for a society that saw women as property! Here Jesus is saying that simply following the letter of the law does not mask the moral failure of lacking to treat the other as someone made in God's image.

And the final example Jesus gave was about empty promises. The Message summarizes it with the intensity that Jesus spoke. It reads, "And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37-5>

make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong."²

You see, this false sense of righteousness made Jesus upset in Matthew's gospel. What Jesus revealed is that the intent of the law is to bring human flourishing. As Rev. Dr. Matthew Skinner puts it, Jesus desired to rescue the law from religious people who misused the law as a source of oppression or self-promotion. Jesus got angry about practicing righteousness in public and about using religion to increase status. Jesus got angry about religion that did not bring liberation and life.

Throughout today's gospel, Jesus took written commands and revealed how they are all about forming a community—a community of love, belonging, and compassion. And how often are we those religious people who do the opposite of this intention? We do that when we talk about faith as "me" instead of "we." We do the opposite when we desire to be served instead of serving. We do the opposite we turn our faith into a product that can be purchased. Or, when we talk about the church as being about what *I* want instead of what is best for the community and true to God's vision. And that's what we heard in Deuteronomy when Moses gave a speech. Moses reminded us that the law, those commandments given by God, is not a negative thing. The law is not intended to limit life, but it's designed to create life. The structure brings life. The law interpreted with love is a pure gift.

You see, this is really important: God's intention is to bring an abundance of life rooted in liberation and love. Anything else, anything else is a lie and is not Christ's story. Moments ago, we witnessed the promise that God gave to you and me in baptism. A promise that now remains with Rex and Agatha forever. A promise that we are loved, we are created in God's image, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God. That is the expanding, widening, and life-giving promise that Jesus preached today.

² <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5%3A33-37&version=MSG>

And we take that seriously at Wicker Park Lutheran. That's why we focus on welcoming those of diverse races, gender identities, and countries of birth. It's why we offer our support to Lutheran Disaster Response to assist those recovering from earthquakes in Syria and Turkey. It's why we take seriously the work to move toward making this building more accessible.

And there it is. That's the gift of today's gospel. Jesus has invited us to exceed the righteousness of the pharisees by prioritizing justice and love above the words written on a page. So, be free to love fully, to live abundantly, and to follow God's vision to live in a beloved community. Amen.³

³ This sermon was influenced by the following: a) The Jewish Annotated New Testament; b) https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4371 and c) https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4375