

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel reading picks right up where we left off last week. And, we're about a third of the way through Jesus's famous "sermon on the mount." And it's so very important to remember the context; otherwise, we'll miss the meaning or come to believe in alternative facts. So, we're going to do three things: first, dig into the context; second, dive into the examples; and third, find out what this all means for us.

So, first, the context. At the end of last week's gospel reading, we heard Jesus remind us that he did not come to abolish the law (Matthew 5:17) and that "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). What Jesus said in today's gospel is rooted in those statements, so, let's quickly give some context so that we can all journey together. First, as you may know, "righteousness" is a prominent theme in Matthew's gospel. And, 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. Second, the Pharisees were individuals who, with a literalistic mindset, tried to observe and interpret both the written law of the Torah and the oral laws passed down from previous generations. To recap: Before today's gospel, Jesus encouraged his followers to exceed the most rigorous of religious leaders in working for a just and ethical world. All good?

Then, in today's gospel, Jesus gave four examples that encourage us to amplify this righteousness. First, Jesus reminded us that the law says we shall not murder. That's a pretty straightforward, and mostly something we can agree on. But (and Jesus will say this in each paragraph), Jesus said literally killing is only a beginning—after all, anger, insults, and mischaracterizations can affect death on our neighbors, whether intended or not. We might not always see the casualty caused by our privilege and power until we become aware of the hurt of our careless words to a direct report or until we notice the ways our actions impact people of color. We may not notice the ways our words on social media strike a person and destroy their lives until they're in psychiatric care following a suicide attempt. And, so, Jesus made a bold assertion. Jesus said that the first thing, above all things—even going to your center of worship—is to reflect on how you're relating to others. Then, go and work to be reconciled. Go, resolve your issue to be in relationship. Go, live in harmony with all people. That is God's desire, and that is what it means to go beyond the righteousness of the Pharisees. You see, simply following the letter of the law with a literalistic interpretation is not enough, for murder is more than homicide. Is that making sense?

Next up, adultery. This example and the following one on divorce ooze with the patriarchal lenses of the time. Nevertheless, Jesus stated that adultery goes beyond an act; for, simply lusting after another devalues the individual. And, the responsibility for the lustful gaze is on the gazer, and not on those upon whom one gazes. That is, to exceed the righteousness of Pharisees in regard to adultery means that we all need to stop victim

shaming. For, what matters to Jesus is not merely behavior, it's not the action of perpetrating sexual violence, but rather, the act of objectifying another is an obstacle to authentic community. Objectification treats the other not as a child of God, who is made in God's image, but rather as a commodity. Heaping blame on a victim, rejects the image of God found in the one who has been violated.

And, this is a similar message Jesus's gave about divorce. Again, context matters, and we must remember that marriage in Jesus's time was not a formal recognition of love between two people who are wanting to spend their lives together. Rather, the primary purpose of marriage in Jesus's time was to create a household, which was seen as the fundamental unit of economic production as well as family preservation.

So, Jesus stated that divorce, except on the grounds of unchastity, does not value the person who is made in God's image. And, to be clear, when we're talking about "unchastity" we're not exclusively talking about sex. The term translated here as "unchastity" comes from a Greek word that reflects the belief that a man might divorce his wife on account of "something objectionable." Now, "something objectionable" was debated *a lot* in Jesus' time, but putting the divorce example in this location—that is, right after the importance of see God's presence in people regardless of gender and, then, directly before he talked about being truthful in all circumstances so that we don't need to qualify our words with an oath—putting it in this place, indicates that Jesus felt that divorce should not be done haphazardly without concern for others, but, rather, compassion and understanding should permeate the end of a relationship after "something objectionable"

becomes apparent. There is a time and a place for the end of relationships and divorces, and Jesus reminded us that understanding and love must be a part of the process, because simply following the letter of the law, at a minimum, is not enough.

And, Jesus went on-and-on with his examples in his sermon (maybe I am too), but there is a reason why he is doing this. Remember, Jesus is on that mountain mimicking Moses. And, in today's first reading from Deuteronomy, we heard Moses during a part of his long speech, which is basically that whole book, remind us that the law is not a negative thing. The law does not limit life; in fact, for Moses, the law is life-giving. Having a structure, brings life. The law as interpreted with love, is a pure gift. In a simplistic manner, the law is like Steve Jobs and Albert Einstein who wore the same thing every day because it freed them to focus on the things that really mattered. So too, obeying God's commandment to prioritize people over profits, brings life to us and our descendants. Obeying God's commandment to excessively work for loving justice, brings life to us and our descendants. Obeying God's commandment to obsess about a divine ethic of love, brings life to us and our descendants. God's commandments set us free from the endless debate of *what* to do and instead liberate us to focus on *how* to do it.

So, when we gather here, we know that God desires for us to exceed the minimum requirements of the law. Our God desires for us to use the law to liberate us to expansively, boundlessly, and freely love our neighbors. So, then, our faith compels us to look at the laws of our country and how our elected officials lead and to ask if they are aligned with God's ethic of love.

Then, Jesus encouraged us to use our divine ethic of love to inform our actions and voice as we engage. So too, in the church, we use God's ethic of love to direct our policies to welcome all people regardless of immigration status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Because, simply following the government's laws on immigration and personhood, that is the bare minimum and that's the righteousness of the Pharisees. But, Jesus reminds us to *exceed* their righteousness, to, instead, embrace a loving ethic and to work toward recognizing the humanity of all people.

Now, I don't want my sermon to get longer than Jesus's, so, I'm going to stop. I'm going to leave us in a place where we might have seen how Jesus's examples revealed that God's community is organized around love. God's world is a place where the "letter of the law" is rejected, and instead, the expansive "spirit of the law" built on a divine ethic of love is embraced. It's a world where we come to see that all of us are loved by our God without exception. It's a place where we are welcomed to this table of love and grace, so that we, too, might be strengthened to reflect God's divine ethic of love in all the world. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was heavily influenced by the following: a) The Jewish Annotated New Testament; b) [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4371](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4371) and c) [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4375](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4375)