

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY February 12, 2023

Matthew 5:21-37

21 You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, You shall not murder ; and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, You fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery. 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30And 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.

31 It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. 32But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord. 34But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for

it is the city of the great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37Let your word be Yes, Yes or No, No ; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

SERMON

Here's a great book title- Love people and use things because the opposite never works. The writers of the book Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus advocate a lifestyle of minimalism not for its own sake but for their vision that we move from material to meaning. The notion of loving people and using things sounds a lot like what Jesus calls us toward when he delves into the well-known Ten Commandments. Jesus announces God's realm and a way being that lives in contrast to empires and systems that love their things and use people to perpetuate them.

It's easy to reduce people to things— things we see either as useful to us or things we regard as a threat. Think back to Jesus' warning that calling someone a fool is a form of murder. In effect, we've reduced someone to a thing that's easily labelled and dismissed. I need to think about that when someone cuts me off on the highway or when I read about wrongheaded, cold hearted political shenanigans!

We sometimes label people when we're deciding how to provide medical care or social assistance. Years ago, I remember nurses and doctors pushing back against the practice of describing someone based on their injury or illness...They'd say "It's not the hip fracture in room 10...it's Jane Jones, a person who has a hip fracture."

Sometimes we label people in ways that dehumanize them, making people made in God's image targets for discrimination, prejudice, and even genocide. People I know who were involved in the US war in Viet Nam said they were trained to think of the people as not human—that was supposed to make killing easier for the conscience to bear.

Think about Jesus' words about adultery and divorce. Underneath the "but I say to you" is a repudiation of our objectifying women. The laws around divorce in Jesus' day could ruin a woman, literally putting her on the streets and bringing shame to her family. Jesus' words take us back to the dawn of creation when God decided to make all of humanity in God's own image. We might condemn the Taliban for taking women's rights to education, playing sport, even as working as rescuers in the earthquake that rocked Turkiye and Syria this week. I think we also need to critique our own society when it comes to women being paid the same as men, having the same political and business opportunities, and making decisions about their own bodies and healthcare.

Jesus fulfills the law..not with with tightening the rules. Instead Jesus prods our imaginations to envision God's rule of justice, mercy and true humanity. Jesus might have even appreciated a story rabbis from the Hasidic tradition like to tell....

A rabbi's students were asked how they could tell when the dawn had come and morning prayers could be said.

One student responded by saying, "When you can see the sheep on the hill."

Another suggested that one can tell that the dawn has come when a person is able to distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine.

"No," said the wise one. "It is dawn when you can look into the faces of human beings and you have enough light within you to recognize them as your sisters and brothers." (An Hasidic Tale, shared by John O'Brien in blog by Dr. Simon Duffy).

Remember God liberates us...puts light in us to recognize one another as sisters and brothers...that God calls us to love people and use things, not the other way around...and that the Greatest

commandment of all is to love God with all of our hearts and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Imagine what life would look like when all of that happens!