



Sunday February 12, 2023
Matthew 5:21-37 (Sixth Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Well then. Does anyone else feel like the air has been taken out of the room and the whole mood this morning has shifted? I have to say, this isn't at all how I imagined we'd begin talking about today's gospel. But it's abundantly clear to me *now* why Pastor Chris and Edwin were relieved that they weren't preaching this week.

In today's gospel from Matthew, Jesus is continuing to teach through his Sermon on the Mount. Just last Sunday Jesus was calling us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And the week before that we encountered Jesus passing out blessings left and right like Oprah! But today – today we hear Jesus dig deep into the law, and it's almost like he's making up for all those nice things he said at the beginning with an equal number of new rules and requirements.

If you're anything like me and tend to be a little skeptical, then you're probably thinking, *“well, that figures. Here I thought Jesus was inviting me into his family and calling me all these wonderful things, but now I just have another laundry list of things to do and not do.”* And not only is Jesus upholding the old laws like “do not murder” and “do not commit adultery,” but he's also making them infinitely more difficult to keep.

Let's be honest – at first glance, today's gospel is an uncomfortable and scary text, full of harsh language about anger, divorce, dismemberment and lots of other difficult things we'd rather not think about or deal with. On the surface it doesn't appear to talk about love at all, unless ripping out an eye or cutting off a hand is your twisted idea of love. Instead, it seems to be an all-out reprimand filled with threats of condemnation like – judgement, prison, and the fire of hell. And while I know in my heart that God is not a rule obsessed tyrant waiting to punish me when I make a mistake, I nevertheless still cringe when I hear the dire warnings and I find myself looking anywhere and everywhere for loopholes that lead me back to the unconditional love that I'd much rather hear about.

But believe it or not, if we're willing to take a deeper look, then we'll find that love is precisely what Jesus is focused on teaching.

Jesus isn't reprimanding people in his Sermon on the Mount – rather he's calling forward a new community. A blessed community. A beloved community. A community meant to initiate a new and radical way of doing life on earth. A community that Jesus trusts will follow in his footsteps and embody the love of God to a world hungry for hope and healing.

Science has always interested me. And when I was growing up one year I received a science kit for my birthday. It included several things to conduct some simple lab experiments – but hands down my favorite thing was that it came with a microscope. It was a very basic one, but it still came with a slide that you could put different things on and then look at them under the microscope.

The manual suggested several objects to examine, but the one that caught my attention most was an orange peel. And it just so happened that we had an orange in the house. I was excited but also completely unprepared for what I was about to discover. Seeing the structure of the individual cells of that orange peel took my breath away. It was simply too much for my childhood brain to grasp. Who knew that such beautiful and complex structures could be found in a simple orange peel.

We see so many different things in creation all around us which at first glance seem quite ordinary. So much so that we don't even pay much attention to them, but when their inner complexities are revealed, we're often struck by their unexpected beauty. And then it occurred to me that if something so simple as an orange peel can reflect so much magnificence and grace then it makes me wonder what could possibly be hidden under the surface within each of us?

The longer I sit with this passage of Scripture and the deeper I'm willing to look into it and the more open I am to allow it to reveal its truth to me, the more I see it – and oddly enough – the clearer I see the care and attentiveness of God. God wants us to treat each other well. God cares about our dignity. God doesn't want us to settle for bare minimums of



Sunday February 12, 2023
Matthew 5:21-37 (Sixth Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

civility and morality in the communities we create and exist. God wants us to relate to one another in ways that reflect the fullness of God's love, mercy, grace, and generosity – and we live into that Christ-like identity when we allow the deepest respect, integrity, and love to guide us.

I believe that we do ourselves a disservice when we read Jesus's words as condemnation. Jesus isn't condemning us; he's reminding us of truths we intuitively know. The way of love is hard. It's costly. It hurts. So pay attention to what's important. Jesus says in every way he can think to articulate it. You matter. How you live with each other matters. What you say and do, what you focus on, what you prioritize as my disciples – *these things matter!*

Your choices have life-and-death consequences so please take your lives together seriously. Reconcile with each other. Honor each other. Speak truthfully to each other. Protect each other. And do these things, not to earn God's blessings, but because you are already blessed.

What would it be like if the children of God helped each other to succeed in all the ways Jesus's sermon describes? Imagine what your home, school, workplace, church, community and world would look like. "*But I say to you,*" Jesus says, again and again and again. I say to you that so much more is possible than you have yet comprehended. So, my dear friends, reach for it. Walk into it. Sustain it. You are loved and you are blessed beyond measure, right here, right now. There is nothing left for you to earn, but there is everything left for you to share with one another.

Today our gospel speaks to God's commandments. The commandments are God's law given to us and what we hear in Matthew's gospel is Jesus delivering a new interpretation of the law for his disciples and followers...and yes, that includes us.

So, what if we were to read Jesus' words about murder, anger, reconciliation, adultery, lust, divorce, and oath-making with less of an individualistic lens and instead with more of a communal context? And what if instead of the punishing way we initially hear this text, we instead hear it from a much broader perspective?

What if what Jesus is presenting here isn't a threat with dire consequences if you step out of line? What if it's not just another list of rules to follow, and instead it's more of an instructional video on life together given in the hope of building and sustaining a community.

Like the orange peel – when we look deeper we can see past the first layer, past the do's and don'ts, past the prescriptive and punishing laws to see that each of these warnings is concerned with how we treat each other.

What Jesus is doing in today's gospel is holding up each of the commandments and forcing us to look deeper into God's intention behind the command, to discover the Spirit of the law. What Jesus is doing is broadening our perspective. And so what if God cares that we follow the Law for *our* sake and not simply for the sake of following a restrictive set of rules?

To be clear, Jesus isn't interested in giving us a new checklist of things we aren't supposed to do. Jesus tells us we need to dig deeper into ourselves, to get at the root of our sinfulness and purge it out, before a grudge turns into hatred and murder, before lust turns into a pornography addiction, or leads to adultery and divorce, before an idle word becomes a lie, before a little envy blossoms into full-blown jealousy, or before our apathy turns us away from God's grace and love.

Jesus asks us to open our lives to him, to allow the Holy Spirit to search out our weaknesses before they become sinful habits that separate us from God.

Pastor and theologian David Lose writes that God gives the Law out of love for us, to strengthen community by pointing our attention toward the needs of our neighbor. The "you" in Matthew's gospel is plural. "*The law is not about meeting*



Sunday February 12, 2023
Matthew 5:21-37 (Sixth Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

our individual needs but about creating and sustaining a community in which all of God's children can find nurture, health, safety, and blessing...Jesus intensifies the law to make us more responsible for our neighbor's well-being."

Jesus is calling us to a higher standard of living into the Kingdom of God. He is calling us to a deeper level of commitment and a willingness to be transformed into devoted followers. But to answer that call, we need to reorient our thinking, just as those first followers on the hillside had to do.

We are blessed. We are salt and light, evidence that God is at work among us. And we are called to grow into an even greater understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus both for the abundant life God promises us and for the transformation of the world. A transformation that begins in each of us.

Jesus is more interested in our lives and relationships being put back together and being made whole again than he is in superficial compliance with the rules. The bottom line is – our relationships matter to God.

My friends, today's gospel is certainly not an easy pill to swallow, but there is good news weaved throughout everything Jesus is teaching us – but we must be willing to look deeper, open our hearts and minds, and be obedient to it. The good news is that God delights in you and loves you unconditionally and desires nothing but the best for you. And God has graciously given you and me the gift of relationships with one another where this love can flourish. So may we offer the very best of ourselves to God and each another in thanksgiving for this beautiful life together. Amen.