

“Raising the Bar”
Based on Matthew 5: 21-37
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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Carol Howard Merritt, a Presbyterian pastor in DC tells this story¹:

“When I was in college, there was a woman in our dorm who suffered with [bulimia](#). As a result, the common refrigerator became ground of major tension. I was on edge about it. I would go out on a date on Friday night and have a fabulous meal. I would carefully eat only half of my entree, so that I could enjoy the rest of it the next day for lunch. But when I would open up the door to the fridge anticipating the content of that doggy bag, the leftovers would be gone, along with anything else that might have been edible in the icebox. Then much drama would ensue.

“Until one particular morning.

“I woke up, went into the kitchen to fetch some milk for my coffee, and I gasped. Some one had taped a sign to the refrigerator. In bold red letters, it said: ‘If your hand causes you to sin, CUT IT OFF.’ Then, carefully taped to the sign was a fierce serrated-edge knife.

“It felt like a scene out of a horror movie, but it was a joke. Sort of. I attended a fundamentalist Bible school, and I must say that at that moment I began to question a literal interpretation of scripture. I mean, my leftovers were clearly *not* worth someone’s hand.”

I had a run in with this text at a younger age, watching an episode from *Little House on the Prairie* as a little kid. Ma Ingalls was very sick, with a fever perhaps, and was all alone at the house. For reasons I don’t recall now and surely didn’t understand as a child, she was so sick, she wasn’t really with it, mentally speaking and was influenced by this passage to cut off her hand, as she believed that it had caused her to sin. Luckily, just before she did, Pa got home and was able to stop her. I remember being somewhat traumatized by the idea that cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye because they caused you to sin was even in the Bible, much less that Jesus said it. It sure didn’t sound like the “Jesus loves me” I heard about in Sunday school.

In this passage, we find ourselves wondering, “did Jesus really mean it?” Did Jesus really mean to cut off your hand, or pluck out your eye if they lead you to sin? Well, we can all breathe a sigh of relief. Most Biblical scholars agree that Jesus did not mean it; he was using hyperbole to make his point. But if Jesus didn’t *mean* the part about cutting off the hand that sins, what about the other parts of today’s passage? Did he really mean that anger is as bad as murder? Did he really mean that we need to reconcile with our brother, sister,

¹ Carol Howard Merritt, “Cut it Out,” <http://thehardestquestion.org/years/epiphany6gospel/#more-1078>

neighbor before we worship God? Whether or not we admit it, we all pick and choose what parts of the Bible to take literally, and which are metaphor. I've heard that in some churches, which generally take a more literal interpretation of the Bible, when it comes to these passages they say it's all hyperbole, that Jesus *didn't* really mean any of it. But to brush aside Jesus' difficult sayings by saying that he didn't really mean it, or that it's all hyperbole, is to dilute Jesus and the Gospel and let ourselves off easy.

This is our third week with the Sermon on the Mount. You might recall two weeks ago we read the Beatitudes, then last week's Gospel reading included Jesus saying, "you are the salt of the earth," "you are the light of the world," and saying that he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. Overall, this sermon which continues well past today's reading was, as Biblical scholar N.T. Wright describes, "a challenge to Israel to *be* Israel."²

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that there are a lot of difficult issues in this passage. Perhaps part of what Jesus says here strikes you personally. You might hear certain things in this text for different reasons. But rather than delve into the details of the specific examples Jesus uses—anger, adultery, divorce, taking of oaths—let's get beyond that and look at the greater message. Jesus' message here is that God's Realm isn't about the love of law, but the law of love. The Gospel is not about rules but about relationship. And all of these topics Jesus raises here, are all about broken relationships and community.

When considering Jesus' interpretation of the law we do well to ask ourselves, do we use Biblical law to limit ourselves or to stretch ourselves? The Pharisees of Jesus' time, like so many Christians today, were more interested in limiting people with the letter of the law than growing in the spirit of the law. But rather than the law marking an end point, Jesus interpreted the law to be the starting point. Jesus is calling for a more radical ethic—the Reign of God ethic, where we treat each other with love and respect not only in our actions, but in our hearts and minds.

Jesus uses this formula, "you have heard is said... but I say to you..." to contrast the known religious law with the new standards that he is establishing. The passage begins with the first instance, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But 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." Using the "but I say to you" formula, Jesus teaches that it's not enough to be following the letter of the law, if you are breaking the spirit of the law. As one commentator notes, "It is one thing to behave rightly. It is another thing entirely for one's heart to be oriented toward love. Just as it is easier to make a sacrifice at the temple than it is to do justice (Micah 6), so it is easier to keep the commandment against murder than it is to avoid anger in one's heart."³ This is similar to the Isaiah passage from last week where God says through the prophet that the fast, or worship, that God desires is a fast in the form of caring

² Edwin Chr. Van Driel, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 335.

³ Amy Oden, "Commentary on Gospel" Matthew 5:21-37 for February 13, 2011. www.workingpreacher.org

for the poor. The worship that God requires has little to do with the actions of the ritual and everything to do with the actions of the heart.

Years ago, the California legislature passed their law banning driving while talking on the cell phone without a hands-free device. For some reason, probably having to do with the cell phone lobby, the effective date for the law was a long way off, at least a year away. The law didn't address texting while driving because when the law was written, texting wasn't common. But by the time the law went into effect, many people had become texters. The result was, when the law did go into effect, people opted to text while driving rather than talk on the phone. They weren't breaking the law... But I would rather be sharing a freeway with someone who's driving with a cell phone to their ear than driving while texting.

If we break the law in our hearts or minds, even if we are not breaking it with our actions, we are damaging relationships, and as long as we are damaging relationships with friend, family or neighbor, we cannot have a right relationship with God. This is made clear in Jesus' following statement, "so when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Don't come to worship if you are holding a grudge against someone else. Don't even think about taking communion if you have a broken relationship with a family member or if someone else has a complaint about you. Can you imagine? You think this church is small now, imagine if none of us came to church as long as we had unsettled problems with other people. You'd be lacking a preacher on a pretty regular basis, that's for sure.

The old law is good but not enough in and of itself. Jesus is raising the bar here. It's no longer enough not to murder. Now we are to avoid anger, which leads to murder. Jesus' standards are unobtainable in our current reality, but to be strived for in bringing forth the Reign of Christ in which these standards are the norm.

In this passage, Jesus discourages the human tendency to look for a check list, an easy to follow list of do's and don'ts. But the irony is that so often, we slip into doing exactly what Jesus is preaching against. Jesus is saying, don't get all caught up in letter of the law, because your intentions are just as significant as your actions. But instead of hearing "don't get caught up in the letter of the law" we hear, "ok, so now we're not even supposed to get angry." And we know that we can't help getting angry so we just give up.

But Jesus knew that we can't help getting angry, too. This passage isn't about establishing another rule, one that bans anger, and more about what we do with that anger. Are we going to let our anger damage our relationships or are we going to address the issue, reconcile and maintain healthy relationships? It's less about not getting angry, and more about being a peacemaker. Remember, earlier in his sermon Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Many of interpreted this passage, and others like it, throughout the gospels to be an indication that Jesus was refuting the law of Moses, even though just a few verses earlier Jesus explicitly states that he did not come to abolish the law and prophets but to fulfill them.

Jesus isn't replacing or discounting the law and the prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures, he was building upon them. As theologian Edwin Van Driel explains, "Jesus' sermon presents an ethic that does not contradict as much as it *transcends* Moses. Jesus exhorts Israel to live Torah [the law of Moses] in a new way; not as a law that protects against the danger of sin, but as a law that expresses the abundance of the [Reign] of God."⁴

Last night, some of us gathered for fellowship and watched the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Since it's a re-telling of Homer's *Odyssey*, set in Mississippi during the Depression, it's got an episodic, mythical quality to it. But there's also a lot of Christian allusions and imagery in it. The main character is a verbose, smooth talking Ulysses Everett who, along with two other men, manages to escape from a prisoner chain gang. He's promised them a share of a treasure—the money he got from the robbery he's doing time for. In one scene, they come across a large group of people dressed in white, being baptized in a river. One of the men enthusiastically jumps into the river, to the head of the crowd to be baptized, then excitedly encourages the other two to do the same, saying that the preacher said their sins were all washed away, and it's nothing but the straight and narrow from here on out. But Everett isn't convinced; he explains that Mississippi law isn't quite as forgiving as God.

Through the Odyssean adventures, the relationship among the men grows and while they were all looking out for themselves in the beginning, by the end of the story, they have grown close, taking big risks for one another and for a fourth man whose path crosses theirs. And even when the truth comes out that there is no hidden money, that the treasure Everett was actually seeking was his wife and daughters, and there would be no pay out the other two were expecting, the relationships persist (granted, there was plenty of anger precipitated by that discovery). While Everett doesn't care too much about the letter of the law—particularly Mississippi state law—his heart is certainly in the right place when it comes to God's law of love. He will risk all to be with his family. He will risk all for the lives of his friends.

Jesus raises the bar in his Sermon on the Mount. It's not enough to not do bad things, now we are to resist even thinking thoughts that might lead to do bad things. But Jesus isn't establishing a new list of do's and don'ts. He's showing us a glimpse of the Realm of God. He's pointing us in the direction of the Realm of God and tells us the Way to get there, the Way to help God's Realm break into our lives. And we know that, the Way isn't always easy, and though it might be difficult in our present circumstances, we can get there, just as with great difficulty Everett got to his treasure. We know because Jesus told us in last week's passages, "you are the salt of the earth," "you are the light of the world" and as such, we are called to follow Jesus' Way. We are called to follow a law that expresses the abundance of the God's Realm.

⁴ Edwin Chr. Van Driel, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 357, 359.