

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 12, 2023 (6th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)
Matthew 5:21-37

Now I'll bet Jesus got your attention there. These are some of the HARSHEST words that Jesus EVER speaks. He says it's better to MUTILATE yourself, to cut off your hand, or tear out your eye than to end up in HELL WITH them. These aren't the kind of things we'd expect JESUS to say; Peter or Paul maybe, but NOT JESUS. So what's going ON here? Why does Jesus use such STRONG language?

It's called hyperbole. Jesus is INTENTIONALLY EXAGGERATING to make a point. He doesn't LITERALLY want us to tear out our eye. He doesn't LITERALLY want us to cut off our hand. But he DOES want us to NOTICE this point, to SHOCK us, to get our ATTENTION. There's something PARTICULARLY important going on here, that Jesus wants to make SURE we don't miss. And considering the LANGUAGE he uses, the SEVERITY of it, it MUST be IMPORTANT.

Now, this is actually a little ODD for Jesus. He usually criticizes OTHERS for following the law TOO STRICTLY, TOO RIGIDLY. Jesus was ALWAYS doing things that got HIM into trouble with the overly-stringent KEEPERS of the law. He healed on the Sabbath, he touched unclean people, he ate and drank with the undesirables of society. He CHALLENGED STRICT interpretation of the law, because he knew that the SPIRIT of the law was LOVE.

So sometimes we start to think that following the SPIRIT of the law means that Jesus makes it EASIER. But HERE, Jesus tightens UP the law. It's NOT GOOD ENOUGH to just NOT kill someone, it's not good enough to just NOT commit adultery, it's not good enough to just NOT lie when you swear an oath. God expects MORE than that. God expects us to do BETTER than that. God's holding us to a HIGHER standard.

But as it turns out, it's still the SAME standard. Jesus is STILL holding us to the SPIRIT of the law. And the SPIRIT of the law is LOVE.

When the rules are USED to HURT people, and EXCLUDE people, Jesus stands UP for people, for LOVE. But as he said in LAST week's text, he didn't come to ABOLISH the law, but to FULFILL it. So in THESE cases – anger, lust, lying – when we don't ACT with LOVE, Jesus AGAIN stands UP for love. These things HURT people. They DESTROY relationships. So in THESE cases, the SPIRIT of the law actually holds us to a HIGHER standard. The SPIRIT of the law is LOVE.

And there's a LOT at stake here. In the Prayer our Lord taught us, it says, "Forgive us our trespasses, AS WE forgive those who trespass against US." Have you ever thought about the IMPLICATIONS of that prayer? "Forgive us as WE forgive OTHERS?" It's not like God is using US an EXAMPLE of forgiving others. It means that God treats US the SAME way that WE treat his OTHER children.

Jesus LINKS our relationship with GOD to our relationship with OTHERS: Anger, lust and deceit create a BARRIER to love, and that SAME wall that we erect between us and others, ALSO stands us between us and GOD. If we can't bring ourselves to love others, and maybe even love OURSELVES, how are we EVER going to genuinely BELIEVE that we ARE loved, by GOD? If we can't offer GRACE to another, then we're not ABLE to RECEIVE grace. If we can't offer MERCY to another, then we're not able to RECEIVE mercy. If we can't FORGIVE another, then we're not able to BE forgiven – not because God doesn't OFFER it, but because we're not ABLE to ACCEPT it.

That's why this is so IMPORTANT to Jesus. If we're SEPARATED from God, we're ALREADY in a hell of our own making, and Jesus will do ANYTHING to SAVE us from that. And so, he tells us how to TEAR DOWN that wall.

The process Jesus describes is not that STRANGE a concept, really. In the PHYSICAL realm, we call it SURGERY. Most of us accept that if a part of our body is DISEASED, if it THREATENS our

life, we ELIMINATE the threat, in order to SAVE our life. When a gall bladder or appendix is so badly diseased that it gives us no peace, we cut it out. When a cancer invades, we cut it out. When a hand or foot is diseased beyond help, we amputate – with regret, of course, but with the knowledge that it's better to enter life WITHOUT the disease, than to NOT live at ALL. We understand the PRINCIPLE in the physical realm.

It's the SAME principle in the SPIRITUAL realm. If it causes you to sin, if it causes you to stumble, cut it out.

Or perhaps, you might find it more helpful to think of it as GOD CHISELING it out.

Anger, lust, deceit – they not only separate you from OTHERS, they separate you from GOD. ALLOW God to REMOVE ALL those things that are NOT LOVE, that KEEP you from BEING the person you WANT to be. Allow God to WORK in you, to CHISEL away everything that's NOT his, that didn't COME from God. It's not a sprint; it's a marathon, but when God's work is finished, all that's LEFT is the child of God that you were MADE to be. It may be PAINFUL at times, but it's who God CREATED you to be, and YOU, you are a MASTERPIECE. Amen.