

You Have Heard That It Was Said...But I Say To You
Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Matthew 5: 21-16
Jon Frost

In our first Scripture lesson today, we eavesdrop on one of Moses's final addresses to the people of Israel. As the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, this passage helps wrap up, not only that particular book, but the whole section comprising the first 5 books of the Old Testament, referred to as the Pentateuch or the Books of Moses. Moses is nearing the end of his life and Joshua will soon take up leadership. It has been quite the journey from Genesis to Deuteronomy and after all they've been through, Moses breaks it all down into two possible paths forward for the people of Israel. They can choose life and prosperity - by obeying and observing God's commandments, walking in God's ways, by loving God - or they can choose death and adversity. God has rescued them from Egypt. The law has been given to them. What will they do with it? Will they choose life or death?

In our New Testament lesson, we continue in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, where in verse 21 Jesus begins to more directly interact with the laws and traditions of ancient Israel, collectively referred to as the *Torah*. Holding these two passages side by side is helpful, because it serves to illuminate the way that Matthew frames his gospel very much in terms of presenting Jesus as the new Moses. He wants us to hear echoes of the story of Israel each step of the way in the story of Jesus.

Holding these passages side by side is also helpful because it forces us to ponder how they are related. If we're honest, we'll admit that as Christians we don't always know what to do with the Old Testament. We don't know how to relate to it or how it relates to us. But in holding these passages together and sitting with them both, we may begin to notice how inextricably linked they are.

This is important because the danger for most of us in the room who have been spiritually formed primarily in Christian contexts is that we can inadvertently adopt caricatured pictures of Judaism, thinking things like "The Old Testament is about law while the New Testament is about grace." Or "in the Old Testament people tried to please God through outward means but in the New Testament it's all about the heart." But is it really that simple? Is that even accurate?

The fact is that when we closely examine Scripture in its entirety, we find far more continuity than discontinuity and these clearcut divisions begin to break down. The fact is that Jesus didn't come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. The fact is that Israel, too, knew grace. The law was given to them after the Exodus from Egypt. God didn't say, "You know, I'd really love to part these waters so that you are not engulfed by Egyptian chariots, but first I'm gonna need you to sign off on these two stone tablets."

God chose them and saved them because they were God's chosen people. The *torah* was not the way for the people of Israel to gain God's favor. God had already made covenant with them. *Torah* was a way for them, as God's people, to flourish as fully human people in communion with God and neighbor. Ultimately, God's desire was that *torah* would be written on their hearts.

In a fascinating short book entitled *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner imagines encountering Jesus as presented in Matthew's Gospel and offers reaction to Jesus' teaching as a person of Jewish faith. Regarding this section in Matthew 5, he says what Jesus is doing makes perfect sense in his Jewish context. He stands in a long line of prophets, teachers, and sages who have received the tradition and add to the tradition with their own teaching. Jesus is not replacing *Torah*, nor supplanting it, but he is broadening and deepening it. He is participating in a rich history of Jewish interpretation of Scripture and in so doing, he raises the bar significantly.

The command not to murder isn't just about not murdering, as though you could obey that command by doing everything but the killing. This understanding of the command is like the classic picture of siblings in the back row of the car making a line and one pestering the other saying, "I'm not touching you, I'm not touching you." Maybe that was your ride to church this morning. I may verbally tear you down, degrade the image of God in you, inflict emotional and psychological damage, but "I haven't murdered you." Commandment followed. Check.

No, the point of the command as Jesus reframes it, is to have the maturity to recognize the ways in which anger manifests in our lives and to be able to deal with it before it gets out of control and damages others. As Neusner writes, "Not only must I not kill, I must not even approach that threshold of anger that in the end leads to murder."

There is a progression in Jesus' examples of angry behavior to the end that if our anger runs completely amok in our lives, we will be liable to the hell of fire. At least, that's how it reads in English. In Greek, the word for hell is *gehenna*, which actually referred to a specific place on the southwest slopes of Jerusalem. Gehenna literally referred to this place which was used as a garbage dump from ancient times, with a perpetual smoldering fire. What a powerful image to consider when speaking about anger that burns unchecked within us. Eventually we will be consumed by it.

Most of us will likely get a passing grade when it comes to "do not murder." But in light of how Jesus expands this commandment, how many of us would fare as well when considering what we have spoken, texted, or tweeted, when acting out of a place of anger? Do we choose life in our dealings with one another? Do we consistently speak life to one another? How would those around us the most answer that question about us?

The kingdom Jesus announces in the Beatitudes and teaches about in the Sermon on the Mount isn't just about avoiding the big sins like murder. It is about the presence of the abundant life in Christ, which means that where there is division and discord in

human relationships, the call is to reconciliation. That is where Jesus goes next in this section and he seems to do it with a little bit of a twinkle in his eye.

“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.”

Picture the scene. You’ve arrived into the temple courtyard in Jerusalem with your gift - which in this case is some kind of live animal. You’re just about ready to offer your gift when - doh - Barnabas is still pretty TO’d with me. You’re gonna leave a live animal there while you make the few days’ journey back to Galilee where most of Jesus’ hearers lived, be reconciled to Barnabas, then return to the temple almost a week after you’ve left and offer your gift, which definitely it still there?

The exaggerated and somewhat ridiculous picture, when taken literally, underscores the point. Reconciliation is even more important than worship. There has to be congruity between our posture toward our neighbor during the week and our posture toward God on Sunday. We cannot, Jesus warns, offer praise and worship to God on Sunday with the same hands and lips that tear down one another the rest of the week.

Truth be told it can be hard to embody Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. There seems to be so much cultural inertia moving in the direction of division and of stoking the fires of anger rather than putting them out. Jesus points us toward a different way. He announced what this new way is like in the Beatitudes and he proceeds over the course of his ministry to teach and embody it.

Moses set before the people of Israel life and death. In many ways, Jesus does the same. Just a couple of chapters later in Matthew 7 Jesus says these words: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Friends - in our words, in our deeds, in our daily worship; may we choose life. Amen.

Resources

Neusner, Jacob. *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007.

Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone: Chapters 1-15*. Westminster John Knox, 2015.