

A Tougher Law of Love
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-32

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Just tell me what is expected, no less, no more. Don't complicate things with "if this, then do that, or if that, then do this." There are times when I want simple directions, or clarity regarding rules. One of those times is approaching when I will pull out the 1040 tax form alongside my clergy guide to 2016 taxes. I may differ with those who are seeking tax reform, but I wholeheartedly agree with the call for simplicity, particularly for those who have neither the ability to do their own taxes nor the capacity to pay someone to do so.

For some, the Ten Commandments offer such clear guidelines – thou shalt, not thou may; thou shall not, not it's up to you. Yet, if you are a "Ten Commandments is all we need" kind of person, Jesus is going to muddy the waters. When you want a Lord and Savior to keep things plain and simple, here he sits, giving his Sermon on the Mount, adding footnotes to the law of Moses. Why can't he just leave murder, adultery and divorce well enough alone?

It seems clear, Jesus is no strict constructionist regarding the law, and his expansions and reinterpretations could cause accusations he is actually creating new laws. In fact, he is, and for the most part, they are tougher than the originals.

This week and next we will be looking at several of Jesus' reinterpretations of the Mosaic law. For each, Jesus begins with, "You have heard it said," meaning, "You know this law of God given to Moses." He then follows that with, "But I say to you..." and that is when he begins meddling and muddying.

Today, we will hear Jesus offer a reteaching on murder, a "thou shalt not" with which few have a problem. Yet, then he essentially equates anger with murder. The other "thou shalt not" of the Big Ten Commandments about which we will hear is adultery, which Jesus connects to Jewish laws on divorce.

His words about adultery and divorce are directed to men, for while there were some exceptions made for women to obtain a divorce, the law Jesus addresses is one in which a man has a right to simply ask for and receive a divorce decree, perhaps just because he no longer likes his wife.

Jesus will redefine adultery from a physical act of the body, to an attitude of the eye and heart. He will speak of adultery in terms of lusting, and it was this teaching of Jesus to which President Jimmy Carter referred and caught grief over forty years ago. Those who years ago created the lectionary, did not realize placing this lesson in February, would be the same month the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue would be released. I am pretty sure most men do not look at the issue with an eye to purchasing their wife a swimsuit for Valentine's Day. Once again, Jesus could not be satisfied with simply defined adultery of body, because he considered lust of eye and heart to be as offensive, predatory, and exploitive. [Carter, Warren, Matthew and the Margins, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), p. 146]

I have focused on just the divorce portion of our lesson in sermons, because I believe it requires considering Jesus' teaching in light of both the cultural context of male privilege that allowed easy divorce, and the message of grace, compassion, and forgiveness that permeates Jesus' ministry, particularly in relation to women. This morning, however, my focus will be on the first section of our lesson, murder, anger, and name calling.

Let us hear Jesus reinterpret portions of the law God gave to Moses, with new understandings of the law God has given to him. Matthew 5:21-32:

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²² 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, [saying, 'You idiot,'] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister^[e] has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come 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. ²⁶ Truly 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.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If 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.^[h] ³⁰ And 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.' ³² But 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.*

I've ridden in public buses, walked along streets, and shopped in stores where four letter words seemed to flow as normal speech. Some argue it is the new normal, and I admit I am often taken aback, though I think I am more disheartened than actually offended. At such times, I do wonder what the reaction I would receive if I turned and revealed I was wearing a clergy collar. Perhaps there would be no reaction.

Yet, I am actually more disheartened by the disintegration of our language by people who should know better. I am talking about a culture of name-calling and ridicule uttered with seemingly no regret, not using our small set of banned four letter words, but purportedly acceptable ones. In our lesson, Jesus mentions the four letter word, "fool" and the five letter, "idiot." The non-vulgar one that probably provokes me the most is "jerk"; but "brat," "punk," "dunce," "dope," "moron," "thug," "loser" all have the intent to defame, ridicule or put-down. While I seek to avoid using them, I admit there are times I chuckle when someone I like uses them to slam someone I don't.

Jesus calls it murder, placing those who lob such insults in the same judgment line as murderers, and perhaps even those of us who laugh along. Few of us would make such a connection and parallel, but Jesus sticks his neck out, because he was speaking a tougher law of love for his followers.

Jesus does not discount anger. He does not say one should not be angry. He does not tell his disciples to bury their anger. He does tell them there is a different way to deal with it than name calling. It is the Common English Bible that includes the phrase, "You idiot," which I incorporated into our reading in the New Revised Standard Version. "Idiot" is meant to be an insult. Insults are meant to be heard; and these days it would seem to be echoed within the public arena with the intent to dishonor or shame. Particularly in Jesus' day, and some would say in Middle Eastern culture today, there is a high sensitivity to maintaining honor and avoiding shame.

Some will suggest people are just oversensitive and need to be thicker skinned. I sometimes wonder if our culture has elevated the hurling and receiving of insults to a sport, a test of one's manhood or womanhood to see if you can take an insult, as if life was meant to be a basic training camp.

Did I mention Jesus called anger that elicits such insults murder? The second example he notes is, "You fool!" It sounds tame compared to some others, but it is suggested Jesus is calling upon the first verse words of Psalm 14, "*Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'*" Calling another a fool accuses them of not believing in God, judging them beyond hope or redemption, and thus not a part of the community. Even if true, that determination is God's call, not ours. [*Ibid.*, p. 145]

Now what Jesus does next could possibly affect church attendance nationwide if we took it seriously – and I don't mean in a good way. His example of bringing one's gift to the altar is about worship in synagogue or temple. The offering is made to God, in thanksgiving and praise. The problem, Jesus teaches, is God doesn't want it and won't accept it from one who has been offering insults outside the church doors and then becomes pious upon entering.

Let's be clear. Jesus knew murder and anger were not the same. Yet, what they have in common is broken relationship within the community, and God is not a fan of broken relationships. Murder leaves no chance of reconciliation. Anger does, but not if we park our anger, or sit and let it fester, or make it known with snide comments and stinging insults. Jesus says that doing so, and not seeking reconciliation, makes us as liable to judgment as those who take a life. That's tough teaching.

Later in Matthew, Jesus will tell people to seek out any who have wronged them – one on one at first, then with an elder if necessary, then to the whole community. In today's lesson, Jesus tells people to think of anyone who might have something against them, and go and take the first step toward reconciliation. Leave your gift, because God does not want it from one who comes unreconciled to the offering.

The example of worship is illustrative of how God and Jesus desire human relationships. There is a common thought we can have an independent relationship with God, and separate relationships with family, friends, co-workers, strangers. With such a model, we think we can have tension, anger, and even be unreconciled with another, and still say we are good with God. Jesus is saying, "Think again."

I pondered how to illustrate what we are being encouraged to do. I thought of many stretchable bungee cords, each one connecting me to a person in my life. A separate cord connects me to God. There are times when some of the cords tighten, some of the relationships become tense. And sometimes, a cord snaps and we lose the connection. I think what Jesus is teaching is that we cannot have a separate cord to God, but that every one of the cords that connect us to individuals first wraps around God. So, if any cord snaps, it affects our connection to God. Thus, until we repair the cord, our worship is less than honest, and our offering unpleasing. A tough law of loving God by loving neighbor.

In closing, a word on what is part of Moses' farewell address in Deuteronomy. Moses will not enter the Promised Land with the people, but he has brought them to the brink. He offers a vision. *See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God ... loving the Lord your God, walking in God's ways then you shall live and become numerous... [So,] choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*

The admonition to obey the commandments, love God, and walk in God's way is not focused on individual piety and discipline, but aimed at the community as a whole, to keep faithful and encourage each other in matters of faithfulness. Choosing life meant choosing community over self.

Within Moses' address, the word "prosperity" caught my attention, because in our culture it is most often associated with money and wealth. So-called prosperity Gospel preachers declare if one is faithful, patient, prayerful, obedient, and generous, God will bless them, even if they have to wait a while. Yet, for Moses looking over the people of Israel, prosperity is about length of years and not wealth, but simply having enough within the new land, and not just for oneself, but for the whole community. Thus, the measure of their prosperity is not one's individual well-being, but the welfare of all the nation's people.

Yes, I like rules that are simple, and having checklists of do's and don'ts. That works well when following an instruction manual, or putting together a child's toy, and I hope someday doing taxes will be simpler.

But people relationships are more complicated than numbers we add or parts we assemble, buttons we push or blanks we fill. In Jesus' tougher law of love, he is asking his disciples to hold themselves, and indeed, to hold each other to a higher standard than letter of the law obedience. Anger and name calling are not murder, but they also create broken relationships. Lust is not adultery, but it is as exploitive and demeaning. You are to do better, Jesus says. If you want to keep whole your relationship with God, make whole your relationships with others.