THE HEART OF THE MATTER
by
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The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
8:30 and 11:05 a.m.
Last Friday was of course Valentine’s Day. Like other holidays it has Christian origins that have become extended into other celebrations. St. Valentine was a priest in the third century during a time in which Christians were persecuted. Valentine would covertly marry couples in Christian ceremonies, save Christians from persecution, and serve the poor. The Roman emperor at the time, Claudius II, actually liked Valentine, but when Valentine tried to convert him, Valentine was ultimately martyred. Valentine has now become the patron saint of all sorts of people and things, including engaged couples, beekeepers, travelers, young people, and greetings.

Despite this serious piece of Christian history, Valentine’s Day always reminds me of treats, especially those little candy hearts we used to hand out in elementary school that were supposed to reveal what was in your heart to someone else. They had messages on them, like “Be Mine,” “Yours Forever,” “True Love,” “Hugs and Kisses,” and “Ever After.” The logos now include “Text Me” and “Email me.” During the past few weeks you can’t have gone into any store without seeing hearts, flowers, and chocolates.

Matters of the heart are deeper of course than the exchange of surface messages like those I mentioned, as nice a gesture as those are. I certainly don’t want to get in the way of anyone giving chocolate to anyone else, me included! And the world is probably a better place if people are giving each other chocolate.

Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels are about matters of the heart (lev in Hebrew, kardia in Greek), and they are the context of our scripture today.

Notice with me that in Jesus’ continuing Sermon on the Mount here that the Hebrew laws cited are ones that regulate an outward action — murder is an external action, adultery the same, divorce, etc. And Jesus then speaks to an inner cause. Anger, lust, disregard.
What Jesus does is radicalize the original commandments or amp up their concern. He deepens the law here. He has come, as he says in other places “not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.”

In several other places in the Gospels, Jesus turns to *fulfilling the law* by pointing us to the heart, the internal, the interior life of the person that gives rise to these outwardly painful manifestations and their results.

In response to the lawyer who seeks to test him, Jesus affirms that the heart of Torah is loving the Lord our God with all our heart and all our mind and all our soul and all our strength and our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27).

When the disciples express concern that Jesus has offended the Pharisees with his critique of their ritual purity laws (Matthew 15:12), he asks them, “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (Matthew 15:17-8; Mark 7:15).

In criticizing the quest for material wealth, Jesus says that “where our treasure is, there will our heart be also” (Matthew 6:21 and Luke 12:34).

In coming down on the religious elite for their hypocrisy, he demands, “How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34-5; Luke 6:45).

In the first part of this same sermon read a few weeks ago, Jesus offers this beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

When Jesus expands on the law or fills out its interpretation we usually like to think of it as Jesus bringing grace to a rigid Old Testament, love to a law filled Hebrew scripture. Rather than making it tougher, Jesus, we think, softens it a bit, makes it more appeasable, universal, tolerant to our sensibilities, at least we like to tell ourselves this, at least I do.
And yet...here Jesus clearly doesn't do that. And actually not anywhere else either. He begins most times with this phrase, “You have heard it said before, now I say to you...”

Again in that famous place, Jesus says You have heard it said — love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul and your mind,” now I say to you do this and also love your neighbor. Jesus, that’s great!

It sounds so peace-loving and neighborly, but anyone who has ever actually tried to love the toughest neighbor there is to love understands how hard this is to do without the love of God.

Jesus consistently raises the stakes. It is one thing to take the Torah, the law, and check the box. I didn’t steal today, check. I didn’t kill anyone today, therefore I’m a good person. No adultery today — I’m better than the one who did and so on.

In this way of living, the commandments become a moral check list by which can be graded and set apart from others.

It is much harder to grade what is inside the human heart. It is a much different question with which to wrestle when you’re not just talking about pulling a trigger. You’re asking what is it about my life that makes me want to lash out?

It is a much different question with which to wrestle when you ask, what is it about my heart that makes me betray someone I love the most?

As many of you know, it is a much different question with which to wrestle when it’s not about a certificate of divorce, but about what is going inside me or another person. I don’t have to tell many of you that. Divorce in Jesus’ day also meant abandonment, destitution for many. Jesus has challenging things to say to that here.

New Testament scholar and pastor Thomas Long says, “The most important need ... is to discern what lies at the heart of Jesus’ words, just as Jesus discerned what lay at the heart of the Mosaic law. Marriage is intended to be a communion between two people that expresses, in their mutual fidelity, the
faithfulness of God. It is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for person. In Jesus’ day, the customs and practices of divorce were a direct assault on those values.”

Sometimes leaving an untenable, abusive, loveless relationship is more in keeping with the heart of the law than staying in it. And many other times it means staying and working on it is in keeping with the fulfilled commandment of Jesus.

These are matters of the heart, not just the moral checklist. Jesus raises the stakes. His answer is to root out those places that cause us to go astray. In this obvious hyperbole, Jesus tells us to cut the cancer out, so to speak, remove from oneself the temptations, the places, the things that causes us to break these outer commandments.

Our hearts, our minds, our insides are called to a much deeper level of commitment, loyalty, purity, to holiness of inner life.

You know as well as anyone, these are not theoretical matters. Anger, lust, the breaking of covenants are matters of the heart.

Or as one author said it, the geography of ancient Israel is nothing compared to the geography of the human heart. Our inside map is complex and complicated.

It is a dramatic moment. Moses is at the end of his life and making a series of speeches in our Deuteronomy text. Right or wrong, I imagine a gray-haired man standing in a place where all can see him. He knows he will not “enter and possess” the land with them. They are about to have a new leader, Joshua. Much as Paul alludes to in Corinthians, one can be sure that allegiances arise around different leaders.

For Paul it was disciples of Apollos, or of himself. Paul points to Jesus, Moses points to that same God. This God has given them commandments, Moses reminds them, but not for commandments sake. Sounds like Jesus later.

God has given the people the grace of boundaries, words, wisdom for the people to order the inner and outer lives.
Before you enter the promised land Moses says, remember this: you have choices.

And it’s true. We do. Even though there is much beyond our control, there is much that we can decide to do, people we can decide to be, communities, nations we can decide to become.

Choose life.

Obedience is not the favorite word for a child to hear. It’s not our favorite word to hear. We like to make our own way, follow no rules, shed off what we see as oppressive restrictions – obedience... even the word has fallen out of favor in our contemporary religious parlance.

It feels like a word from another, more oppressive, patriarchal era. But here it is. It is still appropriate used with care and in relationship to a loving God. For it is in obedience to God’s commandments (fulfilled in Jesus we’ve just heard) is the life that really is life.

It does not mean of course that anger, lust, brokenness, and their outer manifestations will not happen but that we will not be ruled by them. Giving our lives over to God means we constantly, daily, by the grace of God fill our lives with love, peace and faithfulness and loyalty and root out all else.

For a time in college, I volunteered in a shelter for women and children. They were all from abusive homes, abuse of every sort imaginable.

It was my responsibility to lead a circle time with the children; they were from very small through high school.

We had a cut-out of a sun and a moon to pass around as a chance to share something happy and something sad from that day or week. And, if they shared, you would find the responses to be at once heart warming and heart breaking.

These children were of course on the receiving end of anger, betrayals, and broken promises of all kinds.

I was thinking the other day that the youngest of those children would be adults in their 20’s now. I wonder what they might say in that circle now when the sun and moon come by.
What would you say?

I would suspect that were we each to take such a survey of our own lives, we might be grateful to find a shelter of a certain sort in which to be honest and share that same range of emotions, our stories. Some of those things we are responsible for and some of it not. Oh, I hope that the church is a shelter for you!

Oh, and at the end of that circle time we would look around the circle and, depending on what was said, a smile would often break out, sometimes a hug, a word of encouragement, and sometimes just a good silence that seemed to indicate that we would go on from here stronger, essentially that we would choose life.

That is the invitation from God, the giver of life.

There are so many interpretations and applications of these passages so I’m just left finally to leave it with you: What would it mean for you to choose life today, this week?

Because that is at the heart of the commandments and at the heart of Jesus

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.