

***“Learning to Live: The New Terrain”***

Global Positioning System devices are extremely popular today. I used to stick to Google Maps because they were easy to access; I also liked the older red and yellow city map books that were published each year or so (although I have to admit that my copies for places like Youngstown, which I visit only infrequently, always wound up somewhat dated).

GPS is especially valuable when you are driving to a place you’ve never been before, and have no clue as to landmarks, and intersections that can help you get your bearings. One problem with Google Maps (or Map Quest) and the map books is that you need to keep referring to the directions, whereas the GPS will speak to you (“turn right at the next intersection”) so you can keep both hands on the wheel and both eyes on the road (always a good practice, I have found).

Finding your way around can be difficult sometimes. I was trying to explain to someone a quicker route to get to either Cleveland Clinic or University Hospital. This has happened before: I know the route I take, but I don’t always pay attention to the street names as I travel, so giving someone else directions by that route is next to impossible.

I’ll bet many of you have been given directions something like: *“Now take this road down a piece, and when you pass the red barn — that’ll be the second red barn — you will come to a fork in the road. You want to stay to your right, and then be real quick to take the next right turn. If you see a barn with the roof sign that reads ‘Chew Mail Pouch,’ you missed the turn.”* Unfamiliar terrain can make you lose your way.

In today’s Gospel, another portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out for His followers a new terrain. He uses the repetitive device of saying, ***“You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . .”*** In each instance, He quotes a portion of the Torah and then proceeds to reframe our understanding of that edict. Remember, last week we heard

Him proclaim, ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”*** So, in no way is Jesus here abolishing anything the Mosaic covenant enjoined; He is helping us to see its fuller impact and meaning. As I said last Sunday, *“In some cases, Jesus’ view will seem almost lax; in other cases it will appear quite severe. In every case it will reflect what Jesus Himself reflected: the will of God.”*

There is a Latin phrase that became a debating point in the time of the Lutheran Reformation. It reads *“ex opere operato.”* Literally, that means *“from the doing of the deed”* and Luther and his cohorts insisted that perfunctory actions that did not include faith could not bring salvific results. The debate over this term extended to the entire sacerdotal (or priest-centered) system of the Roman Catholic Church, in which system it is argued that the priest who does the deed (baptizes, gives communion, speaks absolution) was the essential element to the deed’s efficacy, not the work of the Holy Spirit bringing faith, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins.

In much the same way, the Old Testament Law was viewed, especially by Jesus’ opponents, as something that could be “worked.” The prophet Isaiah had decreed: ***“. . . these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote . . .”*** — a message Jesus would repeat. As Jesus lays out the new terrain of the Law, He focuses on our hearts being centered in the right place.

***“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.”***

First, let's make sure we catch some of the details here. Jesus is quoting from Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18. In both of those citations in Hebrew, and in the Greek of Matthew's Gospel, the term used is properly translated "murder" or even more graphically, "wanton killing." But Jesus pushes it further. Because the act of killing is preceded by the heart condition of anger, we need to look at the anger.

Anger is almost always a secondary feeling; that is, some other feeling comes and gives rise to anger: frustration, anxiety, fear, disappointment, for example. In each case, the primary feeling is not, or for some reason it is presumed cannot be, expressed, and soon anger becomes the response. So Jesus turns our attention to another way by which we often express anger: name-calling.

He cites two examples: What the NRSV translates as "insult" is the Aramaic term "Raca" which has at its root the concept of "worthless." What the NRSV translates as "You fool" is the Greek word,  $\mu\omicron\rho\omicron\nu$  (moron).

How can Jesus equate such name-calling with murder? He is not equating them; He is pointing out that they have a common cause: the human heart bent on having its own way above all else. Note how, as the offenses seem to become less volatile, the punishments increase. That which we discard as unimportant Jesus is taking in utmost seriousness. Your attitude toward others matters; it matters a lot and in matters eternally. Anything we do that diminishes the neighbor is offensive.

So what's the alternative? Reconciliation. We have this time of peace in our worship for this reason: It is to say, *"If there is anything at all that I have done that could in any way bring you to react in anger, disappointment, frustration, or a feeling of betrayal, let us put that aside and ensure that we can be together in peace."* If we fail to make peace, Jesus warns, it can only escalate to where somebody is going to regret having taken the path away from reconciliation.

***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”***

First of all, what does Jesus mean by “adultery”? That word comes from the idea that something has been added to something else to make it unfit for its intended purpose (you will recall last week Jesus said much the same thing about salt becoming tainted. Here He uses the word πορνεία [pornaya] (from which we get the word “pornography”), which usually has the connotation of prostitution. Once again, Jesus goes to the heart and points out the origin of such perverse thoughts and actions as adultery.

But then Jesus seems to take it either to hyperbolic heights or to a scale of behavior that strikes us as too far: ***“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away . . .”*** We are almost inclined to flit past this because it makes us so uncomfortable; but we cannot ignore it because Jesus virtually repeats it: ***“And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away . . .”*** Whoa! He cannot mean that, can He? I’m afraid He does.

But lest we begin to think that Jesus is inviting us to join a cult of self-mutilators, listen to His reasoning (He is being reasonable here). ***“. . . it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”*** When the heart is flying off the handle wanting what it wants, you must take whatever action is necessary to restore yourself to the proper posture. Fortunately, cutting of limbs and disposing of body parts is not the first action we can take to correct our course.

But then Jesus addresses the alternate action that many consider the only viable response to sexual infidelity — divorce. When I was on my vicarage year in Dayton, the Pastor put me in charge of teaching the Adult Instruction Class. In that class was a member who was attending with his fiancé, a second marriage for him. We came to the Sixth

Commandment, ***“You shall not commit adultery,”*** and he asked me point-blank: *“Vicar, is divorce a sin?”* I could tell he was hoping that I would tell him, *“No, it’s perfectly well and good to get a divorce.”* He was shocked and dismayed when I answered simply, *“Yes, it is a sin.”* But I went on to explain that sin is anything that deviates from God’s plan and intention; but all such deviation, when taken to the cross and crucified in Christ, has been forgiven.

In some theologies, the only way to have that forgiveness is to undo the sin. Well, you cannot undo murder and, while you can undo divorce, it is unlikely to work out well. So, in the final analysis we get to do whatever we want and then seek forgiveness and that’s it? No, in the final analysis we get to learn from Jesus to live in a way that impels our hearts to want what He wants which is to keep faith with those to whom we have made covenants of love.

It should also be pointed out here that Jesus was addressing a culture that made it possible for a man to get a divorce by simply announcing publicly that was his wish; and that women had no standing or say-so in the matter. Professor Carla Works writes: *“In the first century, most women are dependent upon fathers or husbands for their daily livelihood. To be used and discarded for another’s sexual desires had repercussions. A woman who had been seduced brought great shame upon her family. A woman who had been raped was considered damaged goods. For young women, the ability to marry well would be jeopardized. For those who were married, there would be the threat of divorce. Wives could be cast aside for ridiculous reasons, including burning bread.”* Jesus is castigating this kind of imbalance and calls upon His followers to live at a higher standard, one reflected in the next marker in the new terrain.

***“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by***

***Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ”***

Once again Jesus cites the Mosaic covenant (Leviticus 19:12 and Numbers 30:2) and here He seems not just to re-image it, but to contradict it. What Jesus is addressing is a very contemporary issue for us: being truthful.

How many times have you said, or had said to you, *“I swear to God!”*? The Second Commandment requires of us that we ***“not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”*** “Vain” from the Latin *vanus* — “empty.” Do not toss God’s name around in an empty, that is meaningless, way. There is no need to invoke God’s name to get another person to recognize that you are telling the truth; it is an empty use of God’s name. In fact, whenever I hear the phrase, *“I swear to God,”* my immediate reaction is to look for the lie that is being covered up by those words.

Jesus wants his disciples to be people of integrity, people who are faithful to their promises, people who have no need to swear that they are telling the truth because they are truth-tellers. The antidote to such frivolous use of God’s name? Simplicity. ***“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”*** Eugene Peterson has nicely paraphrased this verse: *“You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.”* [The Message]

Now, how is this “new terrain”? Jesus wants us to look not so much at our behaviors as the underlying heart issues that drive those behaviors. When we get caught up in determining if this action is okay but that one might not be, and that one is most certainly wrong, we are reading off the

wrong map.

First, because our sinful selves will always want to excuse our actions while condemning the actions of the other, we get lost in the search for excuses. Second, any assessment of behaviors eventually leads into the issue of performance: “*Am I doing it well enough to please God?*” I tell you the answer to that question each and every time is “*NO!*” There is nothing you can do to please God; there is something that you already are that pleases Him completely. You are His child. You are His beloved.

So forget about performance anxiety. Forget about behavior modification. The new terrain is the terrain of the heart.

Where is your heart? Is it centered on Christ? Does your heart beat in rhythm with His? Are you reflecting that you are what says you are: “*pure in heart*”? That gets reflected in how you deal with others, how you think of others. Do you assign blame? Are you content when a relationship is damaged or broken? Are you unwilling to make the first move to restore that relationship? If your attitude toward others is to reflect the heart and mind of Christ, you are never content when a relationship goes awry.

So my challenge to you this week, a way to learn how to live in this new terrain, is two-fold.

First, call to mind one of the relationships in your life that is most important to you. A relationship that is healthy and whole and good and sustains you regularly. Think about what makes that a good relationship, about why it’s so important. Then give God thanks for that person and the relationship you share.

Second, call to mind another relationship that is important to you but that has suffered some damage. No need to figure out who was to blame for the hurt, but rather to hold that person and that relationship in prayer. Offer that broken relationship up to God as an offering and as an arena

of God's help and healing. Think about what action you can take to move that relationship to greater health.

Lord God, we pray that You would continue to use both Your Law and Your Gospel to heal and restore our relationships. Give us Your heart for others, especially those whom You have made important for our lives. Open us more and more to reflect Your love, Your forgiveness, Your compassion to those You bring into our lives. In Jesus' Name. Amen.