

Matthew 5:21-37

But I Say

There is a story of a wise tribal chief who sent his three sons on a vision quest. He pointed them in the direction of a high mountain and asked each of them to bring back a token to show how far upward each had been able to climb.

The first son returned quickly. He held in his hand a wild flower. The chief knew that these grew just below the timber line.

The second son brought back a stone of red flint which revealed that he almost made it to the top.

The third son was gone for a very long time, and when he returned he was empty handed.

Father, he said, Where I stood, I saw a beautiful valley where two great rivers joined the ocean. The vision was so magnificent that I couldn't pull myself away. I'm afraid I got so carried away that I forgot to bring anything back with me.

The chief knew that this son had reached the peak of the mountain and said to him, *It has been my ambition in life that one day all my sons shall see the vision you have seen. You having nothing in your hand, but you have a vision in your soul.*¹

A vision for a world that respects all people. It is that simple and that difficult. That really is what this very challenging passage from scripture is about. Living in a way that exemplifies a higher love. A love that looks at anger, adultery, divorce, and making oaths from the perspective of what shows compassion and care for another and a love that keeps us from sin.

We are human so to live in the way that Jesus teaches here would seem an impossible ask...unattainable. It would do us well to remember that this is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He began with "Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek", and so on.

Jesus knows people, knows the pain, sorrow, and hurt that we experience. He lived it and was hung on a cross to die because of people's anger, concern for power, and the threat that he posed due his teaching about a new kingdom. The kingdom Jesus spoke

¹ The Rev. William Joseph Adams. [Epiphany 6 Year A \(sundaygospeltalk.com\)](http://sundaygospeltalk.com). Accessed February 10, 2023

about was one of love and grace, one where people would be a peace and their needs met. But all authorities paid attention to was the threat of a new kingdom that might undermine their power and would take control, or even pose a threat of war and people rebelling. They did not hear the word of love.

And it is difficult to hear the word of love in the scripture concerning anger. Years past, for many, preaching was what one referred to as hell fire and brimstone where you get your act together or else. These words of Jesus about anger feel like hell fire and brimstone, but really it is about our hearts, about reconciliation, about the best relationships that we can attain. It is not that we don't get angry. Sometimes it takes anger to make change in the world. Rather it is about how we act on that anger. Does our anger reflect a need of those most vulnerable or our own desire for justice for ourselves? Does our anger bring about reconciliation or just beget more frustration, violence, and rage?

As for adultery and divorce, it is important to remember that these words are spoken at a time in history when women were considered and understood to be possessions. When it came to adultery, the woman was seen as the seductress. The man did not bear the weight of the burden of making poor choices. It was the woman who made them do it.

As well, in the case of divorce, if women were outcast by their husband, they would not have a place to go. There would be no provision for them. In speaking as Jesus did his intent seems to be making safe harbour for women at a time when they could be deeply vulnerable in body, mind, and spirit. Given the rights and laws that we have, at least in Canada and elsewhere in the world, women do not have to stay in marriages that are unsafe. We know the damage for anyone in an intimate relationship, such as a marriage where there is abuse, where it can well be that divorce is the best and safest option for all involved.

Concerning oaths, well oaths were like signing a contract. At that time not all could read or write, one's word was taken as the basis for commerce and community. There were some who would swear by heaven and earth that they would keep their word. Jesus is simply saying if you speak the truth always then your yes is enough, and your no is enough. You don't need to emphasize it with an oath, for if your word is not enough then the oath means nothing as well.

Jesus starts this part of the conversation with "You have heard that it was said...But I say to you". When addressing these things, Jesus is referring to both the law or commandments as well as the teachings that had become part of the societal norms. "*You have heard that it was said* to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'...*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." (v21-22)

“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.” (v27-28).

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.” (v31-32)

Followed by, *“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.” (v 33-35b).*

You have heard...but I say. Jesus was not saying that the commandments were wrong or not enough, but rather that how we live into them matters. What is in our hearts and minds matters. How we treat others matters. You have heard that this is the minimum that you must do to be a follower of Christ and to find your place comfortably in the world and make it into heaven when your living is done, but Jesus says to us, the minimum is not God's desire. The hope, the promise, is abundant life and so how we live, how we care for others, how we go above and beyond, how we hold ourselves to a higher standard, well that all matters.

Jesus cast a vision for a world where love is the basis of everything, love so deep, so wide, so high, so broad that it would embrace all living things, people and creation. A love so breathtaking, so magnificent, that you forget to bring something back from your experience of it. You know deep joy, hope, peace, gratitude, and of course love for yourself, but also for all, and that flows from you to others. That is the piece you bring back.

It is important to remember that when Matthew was writing he was writing to community, so the hope is that we experience this breath-taking, magnificent love, but that the community of faith is also an expression of the breath-taking, magnificent love. Can we attain it? Not perfectly. But can we live into it? Lean into it? Jesus seems to think we can.

May we believe it ourselves and live our lives as individuals and as a community of faith that demonstrates a higher love and a broader, deeper, magnificent, breath-taking vision of a kingdom of love – the Kingdom of God!