

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay
<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> - Minister: Rev. Joyce Yanishewski
6th Sunday after Epiphany - February 12, 2023

Words of Welcome

What is the best that we can be? The best we can do or attain? This isn't about becoming the best at getting things, but do our best at living. Come along with me as we look at one of Jesus' most challenging teachings.

Call to Worship

You could have stayed in bed, you could be eating breakfast out.

We have chosen to be in this place, feasting on God's words.

You could give a cold shoulder to your neighbors,
you could warm yourself in front of the fire.

We have chosen to see God with more than just a sliver of our hearts.

You could be chasing after the world's idols,
you could be listening to television's talking heads.

We have chosen to serve the One who blesses us with life.

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Hymn

A new commandment

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A new commandment I give unto you,
that you love one another as I have loved you,
that you love one another as I have loved you.
By this shall all know you are my disciples:
if you have love one for another;
by this shall all know you are my disciples:
if you have love one for another.

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Prayer of Adoration and Confession

God of all life and each life,
You are the light of minds that seek to know you.
You are strength for those who seek to serve you.
You reveal truth to those who search for you.

In worship, we pause in your presence, resting from our work and responsibilities,
from our worries and distractions. We come to enjoy your presence and praise you
for the gift of life in Christ and in creation.

God who is all in all,

**You call us to choose life and walk in your ways, but we are tempted by short
cuts and easy solutions. You ask us to turn from anger and settle our
differences, but we cling to grievances and point fingers at others. You ask us**

to be true to our word, but we prefer to keep everyone happy. Forgive us, O God; and give us courage to follow the paths you set for your people.

God of promise and purpose, in the midst of life's distractions, still our minds to listen. In the midst of competing voices, speak your Word of truth. Send your Spirit to help us make wise choices.

Receive our prayers and praise this day, for we open our hearts in love and loyalty to you, O God, our All in All. Amen.

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Assurance of Forgiveness

God invites us to choose life and find the blessing that comes from following God's ways.

Accept God's gift of forgiveness and choose new life.

Forgive one another and discover the peace of Christ. Amen.

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Scripture Reading Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement."²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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.²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister 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.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.

³³ '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."³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ And do not swear

by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

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Message 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 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

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

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!

Prayers of the People

God of Life and Love,
in spoken words and in the silence of our hearts,
we give you thanks for all of life,
for the grace you provide to creation in its diversity,
and for your loving kindness known in the details of our lives.
Hear us, we pray, as we speak of matters on our hearts and minds this day:

Where the church is divided by squabbling or deep disagreement,
where Christians emphasize our differences instead of seeking unity in Christ,
where we put energy into guarding tradition

at the expense of honouring new life and relationships with our neighbours:
transform us and make all things new.

Where families are divided by old hurts or new tensions,
where friendships have ended through misunderstanding or neglect,
where relationships have been severed by betrayal or thoughtlessness:
transform us and make all things new.

Where countries are torn by war and conflict,
where communities are divided by prejudice or unexamined privilege,
where leaders provoke anger instead of building understanding co-operation:
transform us and make all things new.

Where the poor and lonely find little support or comfort,
where people are tired from overwork or pressured by rising costs;
where workers fear for their jobs in the present or the future;
transform us and make all things new.

Where people suffer pain with physical, emotional or spiritual roots,
Where loss marks the beginning and ending of every day,
Where young people fear for the future of the planet
and their elders mourn the loss of what they once assumed would last:
Transform us and make all things new.

God, our Source and Saviour, in Christ you make all things new.
And so, united in one voice, we pray the words he taught us:

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to the offering

God sets choices before us. Some can bring life and blessing, but others lead to despair. When we give our gifts to God, we make a choice for life, a choice to bless others in God's holy name. So trust that God will bless the choice we make today.

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If you consider St. Andrew's your church, regardless of where you live, would like to learn more about St. Andrew's, get involved in our ministry and work, or make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian, in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Hymn

Draw the circle wide

Refrain

*Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still,
Let this be our song: no one stands alone
Standing side by side. draw the circle wide.*

1. God the still-point of the circle
Round whom all creation turns
Nothing lost, but held together
in God's gracious arms.

Refrain

2. Let our hearts touch far horizons,
so encompass great and small;
Let our loving know no borders,
faithful to God's call.

Refrain

3. Let the dreams we dream be larger
than we've ever dreamed before;
Let the dream of Christ be in us,
open every door.

Refrain

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Benediction

Go with joy and peace, to claim new life as you serve God and one another.
And may the blessing of God who is Source, Saviour and Spirit of Life
be with you and those whose lives you touch,
this day and always. Amen.

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