

21-22 “You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

23-24 “This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

25-26 “Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won’t get out without a stiff fine. 27-28 “You know the next commandment pretty well, too: ‘Don’t go to bed with another’s spouse.’ But don’t think you’ve preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those ogling looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

29-30 “Let’s not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here’s what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

31-32 “Remember the Scripture that says, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights’? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are ‘legal.’ Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you’re responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you’re automatically an adulterer yourself. You can’t use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

33-37 “And don’t say anything you don’t mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. 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. This is the word of the Lord.

“The Law of Love”

Well, I am not alone in thinking that these verses, these final ones of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, may just be some of the most uncomfortable verses in all of the New Testament. In fact, a preacher colleague of mine suggested that this is the week for wise preachers to go on vacation and pass the text to an associate or a guest preacher! Yes, Jesus turns up the theological pressure, ups the stakes, raises the bar with these words. They are tough. They’re tough because they speak to all of us. Rev. Randy Harris says that *“Jesus has here quit preachin’ and gone to meddlin’.”*¹ But, brothers and sisters, Jesus speaks intentionally, and what he says is foundationally important for us to hear.

I chose today to read from *The Message* and although I like the way Eugene Peterson says things, the paraphrase does not include Jesus’ speech pattern which is in most other translations. In it, Jesus repeatedly says, *“You have heard it said to those of old...but I say to you...”*. With this pattern of speech, it may be tempting for us to hear his words as new commandments, more up-to-date replacements on the ancient Torah, the Law of Moses, the 10 Commandments. But this is NOT what Jesus has in mind. Instead, he is reiterating the established Law to allow us to dig deeper, to *“mine the riches of what God has already given”*.²

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine published a book on the Sermon on the Mount in which she suggests that Jesus here is teaching like a traditional first-century Rabbi. She says, *“He is ‘building a fence around the Torah.’”*³ In order to help people avoid breaking commandments in the Torah, those ancient Rabbis often extended the implications of a commandment as a way to make the original commandment more difficult to break. To that end, Levine posits, *“what’s the best way not to murder someone?”* Deal with your anger before it escalates to murder. *How to avoid adultery?* Find a way to make it harder to indulge your lust. *Want to minimize feuds?* Watch what you say to begin with and be quick to reconcile. Basically, you need break the cycle that leads to these

¹ Randy Harris. *“Fully Human”*. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/64ced9bf6615fb4112000055/randy-harris-fully-human>. (accessed 2-10-23).

² Warren Thomas Swenson. *“Mining the Riches”*. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/mining-the-riches-epiphany-6-a-february-12-2023/> (accessed 2-10-23).

³ Amy-Jill Levine. *“Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven.”* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 28.

escalations. Find a way to say something, or do something, that disrupts the cycle that can lead to something much worse.

This is helpful certainly, certainly, but ultimately, we need ask, “*to what end is Jesus digging deeper, is he mining here?*” With his lifting up of the Torah and his addition of these extensions to build a fence around, what is Jesus’ real goal? What is his purpose?

Well....if we know Jesus at all...a good bet is that it has to do with protecting our relationships, those bonds which make it possible for us to live more fully together, right? And it would be correct to think that it has to do with orienting us to the needs of our neighbor, so that all of God’s children, whom God lovingly created in God’s image, can find nurture, health, safety and blessing in our life together! Jesus lived his whole life trying to teach us this, and he died showing us this. This is what he meant when he said that he’d come to fulfill the Law. So, Jesus’ purpose is to show that the Law and its intensified version in the Sermon on the Mount, is given so that humanity can live a beautiful and abundant life of love together.

Note within the rhythm and pattern of the sermon, that Jesus is describing the reality of harm that occurs when we do not honor our relationships, when we do not love neighbor as ourselves. He describes the distance that anger creates in us one from one another, how certain kinds of anger and insult can themselves be a form of violence, and how the power and privilege of some can affect death on others, intended or not.⁴ He describes the pain created with divorce, the kind of divorce which was tantamount to the discarding of a spouse on a whim,⁵ and he describes the destruction of trust between persons that results from broken vows and promises. We’re brought to consider what happens to our relationships when we participate in gossip, or even sit on the fence, as words destroy others, and as we go on thinking that words about others really don’t matter if they don’t hear us? What happens to the Community when we denigrate a person whom God tenderly created to simply being an object by virtue of their appearance, or by participating in the current sex culture...movies, TV shows, dirty jokes and media which

⁴ Eric Barreto. “*Sixth Sunday after Epiphany*”. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37-4> (accessed 2-10-2023).

⁵Melanie Howard. “*Commentary on Matthew 5:21-37*”. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37-5> (accessed 2-10-2023).

feeds lustful thoughts, all the while thinking that we're righteous if we've not committed adultery? What happens to the culture when we choose "alternative facts", and discard mistruths as simply another's opinion, diluting our Yes's and confusing our No's, and yet think somehow that we're minimizing conflict or mediating dispute? (I think we know)

I often listen to a recorded discussion of the week's texts by professors at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. One of the professors, when speaking about this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, recently said that if JESUS had written the best-seller book, Your Best Life Now instead of Joel Olsteen, he'd have named it, Your Neighbor's Best Life Now.⁶

These are tough texts and uncomfortable, yes, but friends, they were given to make us aware of how sincerely God wants us to live happy lives in relation with others, in caring for the alien as we do the ally, the enemy as we do our kin. And they were given as a barometer for our relationship with God. It all boils down to our understanding God with us, us with God, and us with each other, and at peace with ourselves.

David Lose tells a story that for him captured how the Law—including the Sermon on the Mount—reveals the loving parental heart of a God who wants nothing more than the health and happiness of all GOD'S children in relation with each other. Frank, an 8 yo, started arguing with his sister. Before long, the arguing turned to pushing and shoving, and, soon enough, Frank had his younger sister pinned to the ground with his fist raised in the air. At that moment, his mother came into the room and told him to stop it. In response, Frank reared up as only an 8 yo can and declared, "She's my sister. I can do anything I want to her." Frank's mom reportedly swooped across the room like an eagle, towered over him, and said, "Oh no you can't...She's MY daughter"!⁷

Right. Throughout long generations our God has loved God's people ... all of them... so deeply that God gave the Law of Moses to the Jews and then came in the person of Jesus to fulfill it. Jesus came to strengthen our community, to teach us that, "If we love him and claim

⁶ Quoted by David Lose. "Epiphany 6A: On Love and Law" In: *In the Meantime*. <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-6a-on-love-and-law/> (accessed 2-10-2017).

⁷ David Lose. "Epiphany 6A: On Love and Law" In: *In the Meantime*. <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-6a-on-love-and-law/> (accessed 2-10-2017).

to follow him, we can't harm our neighbor, even in our thoughts, because everyone is God's son or daughter".⁸ He came to teach us that when we orient ourselves to the needs of our neighbor, when we love our neighbors as ourselves, the Community will flourish and our lives together will be blessed. We see the extent to which God went to communicate this when we see Jesus, hanging on a tree, pouring out this love with his very life for you, for me and for all.

"You have heard that it was said to those of oldbut I say to you..."

Would you pray with me..

Loving God, renew us as we seek to follow in Christ's way. Stir up within us a desire to tend to our relationships that we may live and share and serve in such a way that we give honor to the bonds of love and fellowship in which our lives are held. May our living be a means of grace and blessing and a witness to the new life you offer us in Christ.⁹ Amen.

⁸ David Lose.

⁹ Randy Harris.