

February 12, 2023

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

“But I Say to You”

Coming off of having COVID this week I was really hoping the lectionary readings for today would take it easy on me...gulp

This is how I know God has a sense of humor.

“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...”

“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 [sibling], you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a [sibling], you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Jesus is coming in hot with his message this week.

Contextually, today’s pericope is the end of the sermon on the mountain that started a few weeks ago – that very same mountaintop sermon that gave us the Beatitudes, all of the “blessings” – the sermon where we were reminded that Jesus sees us, all of what makes us who we are, and God blesses us

The text we read this morning is the end of that sermon – it has a slightly different feel to it, doesn’t it?

And yet, I think it is such a necessary completion of that image of who God created us to be and what God calls us to

Jesus has an amazing way of preaching directly to our hearts

The tool he uses this week is the rhetorical tool we hear throughout this morning’s text: “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...”

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’” at this point Jesus has all of us nodding

“Yes Jesus, yes! Amen! “You shall not kill” is one of the 10 Commandments – we are with you, we will not kill.”

“But I say to you that if you are angry with a [sibling], you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a [sibling], you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Well now this just got personal – now there is not a heart in our midst that doesn’t feel convicted by Jesus’ words.

Now it is no longer possible for us to distance ourselves from the command “thou shall not kill” as if it were only a commandment for those who might, at some point in their lives, have the occasion and desire to take someone else’s life

Jesus has made this commandment less esoteric and more communal, less abstract and more personal

We are all convicted by this commandment, not because we are tempted to take another person’s life, but because we are tempted to not take the lives of others as seriously as we take our own

Jesus, being the great teacher that he is, helps to remind us that God is present not just in the big commandments but in the spaces between the letters and sentences too

God doesn’t want us to simply be the church that didn’t kill anyone, God wants us to be the church that, as one of the other gospels puts it, helped each other to have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10)

As Debie Thomas puts it, “God doesn’t want us to settle for bare minimums in the communities we create; God wants us to relate in ways that reflect the fullness of divine love, mercy, grace, and generosity.”<sup>1</sup>

“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...”

We don’t read it in our texts this morning, but if you keep reading just a bit further in chapter 5 of Matthew, Jesus goes on to say “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,”  
(Matthew 5: 43-44)

Jesus is not willing to settle for that bare minimum

But so often we are, and we do

We settle for the bare minimum – we acquiesce to the standard of comfort, maybe even embellish with a bit of luxury from time to time

Which, to be fair, is exactly what our society says we should strive for

But God says “strive first for the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33)

This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t strive for comfort and, from time to time, luxury, so long as the comfort of all God’s creatures is what is being sought and the opportunity for luxury is neither denied nor unattainable for all God’s people

Jesus’ lessons today can make us feel convicted and admonished – I would be lying if I said that I have never been angry at someone or insulted someone

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2525-but-i-say-to-you>

Of course I have, and I think it's safe to say that we all have, and I think from time to time we need to be pulled back from the edges of our paths and re-focused

One of Jesus' messages is yet again "I see you"

Jesus was giving a bit of a corrective sermon here – but, at the same time, I don't think Jesus was trying to turn the 10 Commandments into the 20 Commandments

I don't think Jesus was simply trying to guilt trip us and to give us more things to add to our to-do lists

Karoline Lewis writes that Jesus' sermon this morning "might sound antagonistic or like a 'do better' moral motivational mantra. But that's the easy way out of his true ask—to hunger for righteousness, to thirst for justice, and then to exceed the norm"<sup>2</sup>

A "to-do" list is the "easy way out" interpretation of this text, Jesus' true ask of us this morning is that we hunger for righteousness, that we thirst for justice, and that we exceed the norms of the world around us

Eric Barreto of Princeton Theological Seminary, puts it this way: "to what [is Jesus' sermon] calling us? Not to a checklist of morality but to a flourishing of life. Not to a baseline of decency but to an embodied, relational, transformative encounter with all whom we meet. Not to a sufficient set of hurdles for righteousness but to a path of wholeness with creature and creator alike."<sup>3</sup>

Honestly, a set of 20 Commandments might seem easier at this point

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/but-i-say-to-you>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37-4>

What God envisions – what we call the kingdom of God – is a whole new way of thinking and being

God doesn't want us to settle for not killing each other, God wants us to seek abundant life for all of God's creatures

God doesn't want us to settle for fidelity in our relationships, God wants us to flourish in relationships

God doesn't want us to settle for simply acknowledging that racism is bad, God wants us to seek to be anti-racist

God doesn't want us to settle for being nice, God wants us to see the face of God in each and every person we meet

God doesn't want us to settle for "all are welcome" signs outside our churches, God wants the great diversity of creation to be recognized and celebrated in our churches, in our classrooms, in our communities, in our politics, in our homes

I feel convicted this morning by Jesus' sermon not because I am a horrible person but because I am a human person who falls easily into the traps and comforts of the norms of society

I feel convicted this morning not because I have done terrible, horrible things but because I sometimes lose sight of God's vision

But, I also feel hopeful this morning because, man, more than anything in the world I want God's vision for our world to come true here on earth as it is in heaven

I feel motivated this morning to not just pay attention to my own needs today but to pay attention to the needs of my neighbors

I feel called this morning to contribute to the world from what has been so blessedly given to me

“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...”

I pray that you would let Jesus words stir you up this morning, too

Stir you to hunger for righteousness, to thirst for justice, and then to exceed the norm

Amen.