

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
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Caroline and I had this funny exchange with our daughter Elaina the other morning. Caroline said, "(Good morning Elaina. How are you doing, hunny?)." "Good," Elaina replied in her usual and short fashion. "(Well, what did you dream about (last night)?)" Elaina said, "(That there was a new minister at (the) church." As you can imagine, I was a bit taken back. The Veits, I, kind of like it here at St. Mark's. She said, "There was a new minister at church who serves us Coke and Chips Ahoy Cookies for communion." I responded, "Oh," with a grin on my face. She did give me permission to share this with you.

What is communion about anyway? It is about following Jesus, who is our Messiah. When we receive communion, we receive Jesus and we commit to follow him as our Lord. But what does that mean? Jesus addresses this in his continuing inaugural sermon that we have been tracking over the last few weeks, his twenty-point sermon.

We learned about how we receive God's blessings, how we are to live like salt and how we are to share the light. We learned about what the "end times," the eschatological community would look like. People would be doing "right" in the world, following Jesus, who came to fulfill the Law and the prophets.

Today, Jesus continues to focus on what it means to follow Him, and what the "end times" community would look like. The Gospel stories cover points five, six, seven, and eight of the twenty-pointer. They are teachings on murder, adultery, divorce, and taking false oaths.

A digression, but sometimes people say that they don't want anything political in church or from the pulpit. Today's scripture reminds me that it is all political. Jesus did not shy away from the issues of the day. He jumped right in, applying the good news to the ideas and controversies.

Point five: murder. Actually, point five is more about love than murder. Jesus makes the point that love does not show hostility – love does not show hostility.

He begins with a focus on the commandment from the Torah, "You shall not murder," and continues with paraphrasing several other legal texts from the Torah, from Exodus (21:12), Leviticus (24:17), Numbers (35:12), and Deuteronomy (17:8-13) "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment."

But then Jesus begins to radicalize the Law. He teaches that even if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. And if you insult someone, you will be liable to the council. If you bully or make fun of someone, you will be liable to the hell of fire.

Actually, his comments are a bit of a parody, a rabbinic casuistry, if you will: clever, but unsound reasoning. Good Jewish teachers often made plays on words and phrases back then in trying to make a point - the point being in this case, not that we should never be angry with each other. That is a normal and natural response at times to worldly circumstances. But, instead,

that we should have no hostility towards other human beings. Love does not show hostility, but instead, reconciliation – this is Communion.

Our mission in the Episcopal Church is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” Reconciliation is at the heart of our faith and at the heart of why Jesus came as the Messiah, the Christ. He came to earth as a real human being. He died, and he rose again, so that all people throughout the world could be reconciled with God and live with God in heaven forever. And the benefits of reconciliation, healed relationships and eternal life, do not have to wait until after our death. We can live now with heavenly glimpses, in reconciliation with God and with each other. Heaven begins now. And, as I mentioned last week, so does hell...which appropriately leads into Jesus’ next sermon point, number six – Adultery.

Incidentally, have you ever heard of a scenario of adultery that turned out well? Can you imagine having a conversation with your spouse saying, “Honey, I will be late tonight. I will be committing adultery with some of our neighborhood friends?” “Oh, okay dear. Have a good night.” No! You would be escorted out the door, never to return, right? Why? Because adultery is so damaging to any relationship. It breaks trust. The conversation is really saying, “Honey, I will be late tonight. I will be out actively breaking the trust between us in our marriage.” It never seems to work out well.

But Jesus furthers the teaching, radicalizing it: “I say to you that everyone who looks at another person with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Ouch. Suddenly, all of those judgmental religious folks are brought to their knees, including me. You don’t have to literally have sex in order to commit adultery. You can lust it in your mind and heart, and it still causes damage and sin.

Once again, Jesus uses some parody. 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.” Cut off the right hand if you are stealing, and so forth.

To those literalists out there, you do not understand rabbinic casuistry. Jesus is not literally inviting you to cut out eyes and hands. Though, sadly, some religious folks do take this literally. The point is, if you are lusting after someone, do not spend time with them. Distance yourself. If you are tempted to steal or do any other sin, talk with God, talk with a friend, go to a twelve-step group, go to church. Get the help you need in order to not sin again.

Here is the main point of point number six: love is not predatory.

Now on to point seven. Jesus focuses on love in marriage. One commentator said, “In the stream of tradition emanating from Jesus, marriage and the family are not a contractual arrangement regulated by law, but a part of the structure of creation itself, the good gift of God to humanity, and, therefore, not at human disposal” (New Interpreters Commentary: Matthew). Jesus, once again, radicalizes the legal tradition. With a parody flavor, Jesus absolutely affirms marriage as fully intact under God’s eyes, not to be broken. But, at the same time, he offers exceptions. He is offering an exception based upon being unchaste. His overall point is that exceptions do exist, and *should* exist in extreme circumstances.

Sadly, I can't tell you how many times women have come to me for counsel because they had wanted a divorce from their husband who was overly controlling or who beat them or threatened them. Many, if not most of the women choose to stay in the relationship because they feel obligated in marriage under God. I say, "Get out." I have literally walked women over to the Safehouse office when it was just around the corner from here. Since it has moved, I usually make a phone call to the office while the person is still in my office and then I offer to drive them over. Why? Because many of them are not strong enough to exit the marriage. They need help. They need support. They need, quite often, safety. And here, Jesus expands the Law, giving a path of help and health to those who are caught in destructive and violent and hurtful marriages.

As we take communion, as we follow Jesus and begin to live in the "end times" community, point five is that love does not show hostility, point six is that love is not predatory, point seven is that while Jesus affirms marriage as not just a contractual agreement, but an absolute relationship between two people and God, he also offers the point that exceptions exist. And finally, point eight: Love is unconditionally truthful.

Jesus paraphrases the Old Testament teachings about oaths from Leviticus and the Psalms (Lev. 19:12; Ps. 50:14). He then rules them out by his command that his followers should take no oaths. His point is that there should be no need for oaths. Why? Because love is unconditionally truthful. We should always be telling the truth. Oaths imply that sometimes truths should be spoken and at other times truths could not be spoken. Love, however, is unconditionally truthful.

So, before I end the sermon on following Jesus, I just wanted Elaina to know that she can have Coke and Chips Ahoy cookies, but just not for communion. The Catholic and Episcopal supply stores only sell bread and wine. That is what Jesus ate at the last supper. Follow Jesus.