

“But I Say to You...”

From childhood on, there are times when we hear hurtful words. When you were a kid on the playground, did you ever hear one of your friends say to a tormentor, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me”? Or “words will never hurt me”? Maybe you yourself said it. But most of us learned at an early age that that statement just isn’t true. And we’re *still* learning that it isn’t true. We learn it anew every time we hear on the news that yet another young person has taken his or her own life as a result of bullying, devastating words. Words can wound. Deeply.

This Sunday, we hear Jesus talking about words that wound. We hear Jesus talking about human relationships. About how we are to live with others in community. We hear more of this preacher’s best-known sermon, which the church reads this year during the season after the Epiphany. The Sermon on the Mount challenges you and me.

It probably challenges Jesus’ first listeners, too. Their way of life, their traditions are grounded in the law of Moses. And

Jesus begins his teaching by reminding them of that law. He starts off by telling them: *You've heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder.'*

Now that's not hard for those first disciples—or for us—to understand or to accept. Our own code of criminal law contains the same prohibition. But then Jesus adds something else, something that begins with the words: *But I say to you...* The law says one thing, but Jesus says something more. And Jesus' teaching is not as easy to follow as the law. The law forbids us from attacking with weapons of death. But, Jesus insists, neither are we to lash out with weapons of words.

Which can happen, Jesus cautions, if we hold within ourselves simmering, smoldering anger. If I'm harboring grudging resentment inside myself, I'm probably not going to physically assault someone. But I might say something I'll regret. Something for which I'll be held accountable. Jesus knows that such anger can lead to bitter words. And even to violent acts.

The Master Teacher wants to be sure we realize that God's good intention for us is to live in harmony with our fellow human beings. If we're in conflict with others, we can't be right

with God. The First Letter of John reminds us that *those who don't love a brother or sister—whom they've seen—can't love God, whom they haven't seen*. If I bring a gift to God when I'm at odds with someone, that gift is meaningless. That's why we share the peace of Christ *before* we offer our gifts. Sharing the peace of Christ with one another has as its sole purpose reconciliation and love.

Jesus instructs you not to offer your gift if there's someone in the church—or someone *outside* the church—who has something against you. Go first to that person, *directly* to that person, and make things right between the two of you. And that's not a suggestion from Jesus. It's a command.

Jim Dennis shares the story of a woman who was convicted by this teaching on reconciliation, as she thought of the brother with whom she had an old quarrel. They hadn't spoken in twenty years. She went to her brother and made it up with him. As he lay on his dying bed.

Brokenness in relationships is of concern to Jesus. So on the mountainside, he teaches on the sensitive subject of divorce. His teaching causes listeners to come face to face with—to grapple with—what we actually believe about marriage.

For we've read the Hebrew Scriptures, which liken God's loving relationship with Israel to a marriage. We've read the New Testament, with its images of Christ as bridegroom and the church as his bride. From the Bible, we understand the marriage bond as sacred—patterned after God's own faithfulness.

But the law of Moses—not the law of God but the law of Moses—permitted a man to divorce his wife as easily as he might sell an animal from his herd or flock. If his wife didn't please him in every way, he could simply write out a certificate of divorce and send her packing. Without any means of support whatsoever. In order to survive, she'd be forced to marry again. Jesus critiques this law allowing such cavalier divorce when he continues: *But I say to you* that the man who divorces a faithful wife causes her to commit adultery. Yet remarriage is the only option available to the one who has been cast out.

And Jesus' compassion is always for the outcast, for the downtrodden, for the destitute. Would he condemn a spouse to remaining in a marriage where there is ongoing intimidation or abuse? I believe that the spirit of his teaching resonates in the position of the United Methodist Church, as stated in "Our Social Principles":

Quote: *God's plan is for lifelong, faithful marriage. The church must be on the forefront of premarital and postmarital counseling in order to create and preserve strong marriages. However, when a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness.*
Endquote.

God's purpose is always for wholeness, and not for brokenness. So in his sermon, Jesus brings up the seventh commandment. *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* *But I say to you that if you look at a woman with lust, you've already committed adultery with her in your heart.* There's that "but I say to you" phrase again. Jesus tells us that simply refraining from the act is not enough.

You've probably noticed that it sounds as though Jesus is speaking only to men here. In the context of that day and time, this may be because the law against adultery is grounded—in part—in the fact that a woman is little more than a piece of property. She has no rights. But her husband's exclusive right to her body must not be violated. Adultery, like murder, is punishable by death. And when an accusation of adultery is

made, even though *two* people are involved, the woman is usually viewed as the offending party.

But Jesus knows, as we do, that both men and women are created in the image of God. And so, in whatever time and place his followers live, Jesus calls each of us—both men and women—to careful self-examination. He asks us to contemplate the connection between the thought and the act. And he asks us to consider the consequences. Jesus declares that it's better to surgically sever whatever part of a person is causing such thoughts and fantasies than it is to give them free rein.

Yet most interpreters have doubted that Jesus “meant these words literally...he wanted to make his point as dramatically as he could.” Scott Hoezee adds: “I suspect that Jesus is being highly clever in letting his metaphoric punishment fit the crime. ‘Would you want to go around in life having certain parts of your body hacked off?’ Jesus asks. ‘Of course not! So stop going around and in your mind hacking off [other certain body parts] of the people at whom you are leering! You are diminishing their bodies and their [humanity] just as surely as you would harm your own body were you really to gouge out an eye or slice off a hand!’” Endquote.

My sisters and brothers, the Jesus we see in Matthew's Gospel often chooses to illustrate his teachings with vivid, figurative language. And in these words from the Sermon on the Mount, that's what he's doing. With this talk of amputation, he gets our attention. And he gets our attention when he speaks of Gehenna. *Gehenna* is a Greek word that our English language Bibles translate with the word *hell*. In biblical times, Gehenna was a valley just south of Jerusalem.

By the time of Jesus, it's believed that Gehenna had become a trash dump. A landfill. A place where garbage was burned. All the time. Perpetually. Sometime later, in the first centuries of Christianity, this Gehenna began to be associated with the image of a fiery region of the underworld.

Now, no matter what your understanding of Gehenna or hell is, hear me when I tell you that if indeed Jesus *is* using powerful figures of speech, his warning is not to be taken lightly. And it is this: There are serious consequences for those who choose to reject God's rule and separate themselves from God.

But I invite you this morning to think about the Jesus you've come to know in the words of this Book—about him and

about what he wants for you. Reflect, if you will, on this One by whose handiwork your body was fashioned. Do you believe that he truly wants that body to be maimed? Do you believe that his will is for that body to be thrown on a rubbish heap? Or eternally tormented? This Jesus who went to the cross for you? This Jesus who suffered and died for you? This Jesus whose love for you is beyond the scope of your imagination? Beloved, I don't believe that God in Christ Jesus wants anything but the best for you.

And our God also wants the best *from* us. At the center of the purity of heart God blesses is personal integrity. Once more, Jesus recalls the law's command: *You shall not swear falsely*. Again, there's a stipulation. *But I say to you, do not swear at all*.

If I have to certify the truth of what I'm saying by swearing an oath, what does that say about my truthfulness the rest of the time? If we're truthful in *all* our speech, others will know that our *yes* means *yes* and our *no* means *no*. Nothing more is needed. If I swear, I risk profaning God's name. God's name is holy. We're called to use it not casually, but with reverence.

Our God is revealed in the One who teaches: *You have heard it said*. And then adds: *But I say to you*. His teachings are

radical! They reach right down to the roots of God's perfect law. Jesus has come not to do away with the law but to *build* on it. And to show us how to live together in God's reign. In this reign, our words to one another are truthful. Not hurtful, but kind. Not callous, but caring. In this reign, we value God's good gift of sexuality by honoring the vows we make in the covenant of marriage.

The teachings of Jesus Christ encompass every aspect of your life and mine. His words demand our all. This One with all authority has raised the bar for us who would follow him more nearly. He sets a high standard. And sometimes we stay so busy worrying about how we can ever live up to that standard that we forget all about grace. We forget that the Preacher of the Sermon on the Mount is also the One who helps us live by its ethic of love.

That's the good news of Matthew's Gospel today. In Jesus' words: *You've heard that it was said...but I say to you*, he makes possible so much more than just complying with a series of mandates. Christ Jesus paints a portrait of a new way for you and me to be in the world with one another. A way to fulfill God's desire that human creatures experience and share in

joyful, reconciled relationship. Between men and women, boys and girls. Between spouses, parents, siblings, children. Between all of us in this family of faith and all outside these doors.

Through the One who this day offers a vision of the way we're created to live and love in God's everlasting reign.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.