

This past week was a challenging one for some of us. The incident at Okemos High School this past Tuesday created some real trauma within our community. So, I am ready for some **good** news! But, as I read today's gospel, we receive words that do not appear to present us with the good news we seek.

I don't know about you, but today I don't really like to hear Jesus' words. Jesus is on a tirade, and he seems to be having an outburst of some kind. Jesus is not messing around and, quite frankly, he seems to have done an about face. He is still preaching his Sermon on the Mount which began with the Beatitudes – those beautiful words of promise and blessing. Then, last week he told us we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And now we get this diatribe of seeming vitriol. What has happened? Why the dramatic change? One could almost think he is having some sort of meltdown as he quickly jumped from telling us that we are salt and light, to this message we hear today. Suddenly Jesus hits us with this eruption of words regarding judgement, murder, prison, divorce, lust, tearing out eyes, chopping off body parts, and being thrown into hellfire of the burning garbage dump outside the city! Frankly, I have to ask, "Jesus, why do you pronounce blessings and then proceed to let loose

with this rant? Why are you getting so intense with us when we just want to sit at your feet and learn? After all, we are so hungry for some **good news!**”

Well, today, Jesus seems to be giving us a heavy-duty dose of the law. He does this by delivering a **new** interpretation of the law as he addresses some of the more contentious issues of his day. And, as we take an initial look at both the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy **and** Jesus’ words in the gospel of Matthew, it seems that we are given a hefty prescription of the law including some heavy penalties for disobeying the law. Yet, if we take a closer look, I think we can gain not only a helpful understanding of the law but also a clearer picture of the God we worship.

Martin Luther stressed that the law, specifically the Ten Commandments, is the precious gift of an adoring parent given to beloved children, urging them **to treat each other well**. The commandments are all about teaching us how to live together as God’s beloved community. That was Jesus’ understanding of the law, and he begins this segment of his sermon by referencing the Ten Commandments. In doing so, he takes these laws to a new level by **broadening** them and **expanding** on their meaning. And he gets intense as he delivers his expanded interpretations. He does this because the God of Scripture is all about **relationships** – our

relationship with God, our relationships with each other and our relationship with our very selves. God cares deeply and passionately about how we treat each other because God loves each one of us so much.

Jesus knows that to live together as the community of God's people and confess that our relationships matter to God means expanding our understanding of the nature and purpose of God's commands. So, as Professor David Lose writes, Jesus doesn't simply heighten the force of the law, he broadens it as he says:

- It's not enough just to refrain from murder. We should also treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful words. The reality is **words matter**.
- It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.
- It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We should **not** treat people as disposable, and we should make sure that the most vulnerable are provided for. And, in the culture of that time as well as in places in our world today, the most vulnerable usually were and are women and children.
- It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all our dealings so that we don't need to make pledges at all.

As Jesus preaches to us today about the law and its meaning, he makes use of **hyperbole**. His use of **exaggerated language** regarding cutting off body parts and burning in hell serve to magnify just how **important** our relationships are to God. **God deeply cares!** Now, such an understanding of a God who cares about our very relationships probably

runs contrary to most people's perception of God. Quite honestly, for most people I would bet that if we asked them to describe what God, the lawgiver, is like they would probably have an image of God as one sitting some place up there with a perpetual finger raised in warning and perhaps accusation. As Pastor David Lose says, people tend to have a picture of God "captured by a familiar line of that great American folk hymn: 'He knows when you are sleeping; he knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake!' While that may seem funny, many folks do picture God as some stern Santa Claus, always ready to judge us for breaking God's laws."

Jesus' words in this passage are very challenging. And his hyperbolic language can reinforce the stern law giver image of God. But the reality is that God is **not** so interested in us keeping the law for the law's sake, but for **our** sake. God is like that loving parent who establishes rules when they tell their child things like don't play in the street, or treat each other well, or don't talk meanly to each other. You see, God is interested in our **hearts** and in our **relationships** with one another. As Jesus speaks to the disciples and to each one of us, he wants us to really look at the heart of **our** actions and look at the root cause of those things we do that are not life-giving. Those are things that break relationships and

those are the very places where we need this God of love to be present. Quite frankly, it is our **hearts** God wants more than anything. God wants to transform our hearts and make us new, and God wants to do this **regardless** of any mistakes we make or have made. Jesus wants us to look at our hearts and look at the root of our actions, whatever they are, because that is where we need God.

Our God is a relational God. God is all about relationship and mutuality. That is the very point of the Ten Commandments. They are given as **gift** to help us live together **in** relationship. And, quite frankly, it is sin that causes us to break our relationships and become separated from each other. **It is sin that manifests itself as separation from God, from each other and from our very selves.** I like the way Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, describes this aspect of sin. He writes:

True evil and true sin must be very well disguised to survive. Separation will normally not look like sin, but will often resemble propriety and even appropriate boundary-keeping. "I have a **right** to be upset!" the righteous soul says.

Well, today, Jesus is again calling us to turn **from separation** to a life of **living in healthy, mutual relationship with God and with each other.**

That turning is what we call repentance. And God is always ready and willing to bathe us in forgiveness and love. As Richard Rohr talks about this relational way of living, he writes, "Every time God forgives us, God is

saying that God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create **with** us."

Jesus is not really on a tirade today. He uses hyperbole and goes to great lengths to take us to a new understanding and show us the gift we have been given in the law. He is giving us a deeper understanding of a God who is all about relationships and love, and a God who deeply desires for **us** to live together as God's beloved community.

Some students once asked Martin Luther, "What is your picture of God?" Luther replied, "When I think of God, I think of a man hanging on a tree." Luther responded with those words because in the cross of Christ we see God's love poured out for the **whole** world and we are reminded that **God** will go to **any** and **all** lengths to communicate just how much God loves us so that we, in turn, may better love one another.

So, go, be reconciled to God, to one another and to your very selves. Go, and live into love, the love that God showers upon each one of us. This news today IS truly good news!