

You Have Heard It Said...

Sermon 50 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 16, 2020

Matthew 5: 21 – 32

On Yom Kippur a Rabbi stood before his congregation, and began his sermon on forgiveness: “How many of you have forgiven your enemies?” he asked.

About half of them raised their hands. Then he rephrased his question and spoke again: “How many of you *want* to forgive your enemies?” Slowly, every hand in the congregation went up, except for that of little old Sadie Horowitz.

“Mrs. Horowitz?” said the Rabbi, “are you not willing to forgive your enemies, even on this Day of Atonement when God forgives us all?”

“I don’t have any enemies,” Mrs. Horowitz replied, smiling sweetly.

“Mrs. Horowitz, that is most impressive. How old are you, again?”

“Ninety-eight,” she replied.

“Oh Mrs. Horowitz, you are such a blessing and a lesson to all of us! Would you please stand up and in front of this congregation, tell us all how a person can live ninety-eight years and not have an enemy in the world.”

Little old Mrs. Horowitz got up slowly, smiled, faced the congregation, and said, “I outlived each and every one!”ⁱ

We laugh because we know it’s true... forgiveness is one of the most difficult parts of our personal lives, our public lives, and even our spiritual lives. We laugh now, but I bet many of us only hope to outlive our foes so that we, too, might be able to say with integrity, “I don’t have any enemies.”

There’s good reason that there was only one woman standing when the Rabbi began his sermon. We all need to forgive and we all need to be forgiven.

The Gospel reading for today is from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Many of us remember that famous sermon for the beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the meek, etc.” but according to Matthew, that is only the beginning of a sermon that goes on for three whole chapters and includes not only beautiful, poetic words of blessing, but also provocative, moral teachings about how Christian disciples are supposed to live. And these teachings, this Christian ethic is deeply rooted in Torah, the law of Moses and the Hebrew people.

Some may imagine that Jesus came to give us a new law and abolish the old law of Torah given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. They say that Jesus came to start a new religion, one of grace and love as opposed to one of anger and vengeance. Sometimes when we get to thinking this way, we let ourselves off the hook a little, about some of the ideas from the Old Testament (as we call it), the things that we don't really want to include in our daily lives and in our spiritual practices. The thought that Jesus came to abolish the old law and to start something new helps us forgive ourselves from that yummy shrimp dinner we ate last night or the bacon egg and cheese biscuit we had this morning. Those are old rules, and Jesus came to give us something new.

You may remember that in the reading from last week, which was part of this same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says quite the opposite: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law, but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17) And in today's reading we begin to see him flesh out that idea a little more.

"You have heard it said... 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

You have heard it said... 'You shall not commit adultery.'

It was also said... 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce... [lest she be accused of adultery].'"

With a brilliant rhythm and repetitive style that would delight any preacher, Jesus upholds and supports Torah law and reminds the people of what they already know. You're not supposed to kill, you're not supposed to cheat, and you're not supposed to divorce your wife. Of course, the divorce part was specifically for the men to hear because women - in Jesus' day - could not file for divorce. In fact, in the ancient laws, divorce could legally happen only in a few specific instances. But even when the legal bond was severed, there were still questions about whether or not the spiritual commitment was released. Also, in Jesus' world, when divorce happened, it was the women who suffered the most. They bore the brunt of the shame and suspicion, and their economic burden was nearly impossible to overcome. To be a divorced woman in the ancient near-East was often worse than (and sometimes included) a death sentence. Here, Jesus is not taking issue only with the legalities of divorce, but he was calling out the ways that men were mistreating and oppressing women – physically, socially, and economically.

You have heard it said... Jesus begins with the law because Jesus didn't come to abolish the law of Moses, Jesus came to transcend it, to bring new life to it, to re-interpret it, and to show us (with his whole life) what Torah looked like in action, incarnate, in human skin. So, each time he quotes from the law, he isn't saying, "don't worry about that part". He is saying...pay attention, there's so much more!

Torah forbids murder, but Jesus says we are also accountable for the things that are the seedbed for taking a life, things like prejudice, hatred, and anger. Torah forbids adultery, but Jesus says that we are also accountable for lust and objectifying one another. Torah forbids divorce, except for in rare circumstance, but Jesus says what is more important is that we take care of those whose lives are woven together with ours.

As Jesus expands the law, with his interpretation, most of us might be feeling a little uneasy because while we may not be murderers, we can certainly identify with feelings of hatred, anger, and lust... we are probably all guilty of hurling an insult or using dehumanizing language.

As Jesus expands the law his new categories begin to reframe the conversation from “us and them” to “us” and well... “us.”

As Jesus expands the law, we begin to recognize that we can no longer point the finger at somebody else, demanding that they right their ways because now, we too are a part of the problem. We too are in need of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another.

American writer, spiritual leader, and Franciscan monk, Richard Rohr does a lot of his work around reconciliation. In one of his daily meditations he tells a story about his mother, as she was nearing the end of her life. Nearing the threshold for several days, and seeming ready to die, she kept talking about a “mesh” that she couldn’t seem to get through. All of her children, now grown, gathered around and sat with her, telling stories and telling her how much they would miss her. Richard’s father joined in echoing their words and saying that he would really miss her. “I don’t believe that,” she piped back.

Richard and his brothers and sisters were shocked at such harsh words coming from their mother’s mouth even as she lay on her death bed.

His father spoke: “I ask your forgiveness for all the times I’ve hurt you in our fifty-four years of marriage, and I forgive you for all the times you’ve hurt me.”

Richard, quite pastorally interjected, “Mother, isn’t that beautiful? Now say it back to Daddy.”

His mother clammed up and didn’t want to say it.

“Mother, you’re soon going to be before God. You don’t want to come before God without forgiving everybody.” Richard pleaded.

She said, “I forgive everybody.”

“But do you forgive Daddy?” Richard asked back.

She continued to resist but after a little prodding from the family she looked at her husband and said, "Rich, I forgive you." Then she stopped.

"Mother, the other half..." Richard insisted.

His mother started breathing heavily and rapidly before she summoned the energy to say, "Rich, I ask your forgiveness."

After a few moments of labored breathing, his mother spoke again, "That's it! That's it! That's what I had to do! ... It's gone, the mesh is gone!"ⁱⁱ

I wonder how many of us are trapped in that same mesh. An indescribable and invisible mesh that keeps us stuck in the past and unable to live fully into God's dreams for our lives?

How many of us have held a grudge, perpetuated an argument, dug in our heels refusing to admit to the ways that we have harmed our relationships just because we are too proud to confess and ask for forgiveness?

Maybe we have asked God's forgiveness, confessing our sins and shortcomings in the privacy of that personal relationship with God, but have we reconciled with those we love?

How many of us feel stuck personally, in our marriages or in a close relationship because we haven't been able to name our shortcomings, or because we haven't been able to truly give and receive forgiveness?

Maybe we have made peace with God in our spiritual lives but have we made peace with one another? Are we trapped in the mesh?

We all need to forgive and we all need to be forgiven.

For some time now, we have read these verses and interpreted them for our own lives. We have placed ourselves within the framework of sins that we have committed and personal relationships that are ours to mend. Some of us have gotten better at seeking reconciliation with those we love. That's a good thing.

But it's not all. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' sermon on the Mount echoes the words of the Hebrew prophets, calling the people to reconcile themselves to and with one another as an essential part of their spiritual commitment to God and neighbor. Yes, there is a micro-interpretation of Jesus' words, a personal application and exhortation to be peace-makers in our individual lives. But that's not all. Within these words there is a global orientation, a macro-interpretation that calls us to rid our world of murder and anger, of insult and

broken relationship, of objectification and dehumanization because we are called to be communities of reconciliation, nations of peacemakers, and one global kingdom modeling God's forgiveness.

As we use the Bible to interpret and shape not only our personal lives but also our public lives and the ways that we engage on a macro-level... I wonder where we might be called to reconcile with our sisters and brothers before we lay our offerings at the altar?

I wonder where and how we might begin to say, "I'm sorry, we were wrong." We were trapped in the mesh.

I wonder how we might need to confess, "We misunderstood, we took advantage," or even, "we acted poorly and selfishly and you paid the price."...we were trapped in the mesh.

I wonder how we might begin to repair the brokenness that exists worldwide because of the sins of racism and classism, sexism and extreme nationalism. God help us, because...we are all caught up in that mesh. ...Unable to forgive...unable to confess...unable to be reconciled...trapped in cycles of pain, grief, and brokenness...

Perhaps the answers are yet to be discovered but maybe, just maybe we might begin with a holy humility that recognizes the sins of our past and our present...

Perhaps we might begin with a spirit of confession that seeks reconciliation with all people, all nations, and even all of creation. Because if we listen to the words of Jesus as he interprets the law and calls his disciples to a higher standard of living, we might also begin to hear and interpret the word for OUR day...

We have heard it said, "You shall not kill..."
But Jesus is saying to us, "do not be an angry people,
hurling insults at others or standing idly by
while others do the same in your name or on your behalf..."

We have heard it said, "You shall not commit adultery..."
But Jesus is saying to us, "do not objectify your sisters and brothers,
treating them as objects for your benefit and fantasy, and
do not make excuses for others who speak and act in such a way..."

We have heard it said, "Do not seek divorce..."
But Jesus is saying, "work for healing in all of your relationships,
personal, social, political, and economic...
and do not let your human condition,
your inclinations toward self-preservation lead you
to divorce yourselves from one another..."

God has created you for relationship. Do not seek to simply outlive your enemies, but make things right with them, ...love them. And begin by going now, go and be reconciled to your sisters and your brothers, each and every one.

ⁱ Joke retrieved from: <https://www.aish.com/j/j/222849481.html>, on February 10, 2020

ⁱⁱ Story from Richard Rohr's daily meditations. <https://cac.org/the-power-of-forgiveness-2017-08-27/>