



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

LIVING INSIDE OUT
VI Epiphany, February 12, 2023
Matthew 5:21-37

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

The Sermon on the Mount continues this week. In his teachings Jesus got more and more specific. Imagine sitting on the grass, listening to Jesus's words with 1st century ears. In my sanctified imagination I see us all – thousands of us –gathered to hear this charismatic son of a carpenter turned rabbi speaking to people who so needed hope of a better life, a Godly life.

We know this Jesus by reputation. He has been teaching counter-cultural interpretations of Torah to people hungry for God's word to be made real to them. Have you ever heard anyone speak so boldly before? I have not. Neither have my friends. We have varied understandings of Mosaic law, some are well versed, others not so much. I have seen some among us in the town square discussing and arguing points of the law – Scribes, Pharisees, and shop-keepers who know Torah well... or so they think. There are town people who normally would be shopping for dinner this evening. Someone asked why we followed Jesus. We had heard him speak with authority. We knew of his calling fishermen to follow him. This man “went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues” and bringing us good news and “healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people.”¹ He seemed so wise. And he had this magnetic personality. So we followed him to see what he would say next.

He seemed to know what was in our hearts. He touched my heart with God's love. Did he touch you? He certainly knew how the Jewish leaders had taught God's law. He wanted us to see a new way to feel God's love. He said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”² This man Jesus came to fulfill the law? Yes, he came to reinterpret the law for us 1st century

people, right here on the mountaintop. And he spoke so well, it was as if he could see right into our hearts.

He spoke about the 6th commandment: “Thou shalt not kill” = “You shall not murder.” Jesus said that God’s law goes further than simply not killing someone. Jesus condemned angry language, especially without cause. So could we be guilty of this grievous sin just by speaking ill of someone? And then he spoke to the 7th Commandment: “Thou shalt not commit adultery” = “You shall not commit adultery.” I kept my eyes down, for I was sitting with my husband and I dared not offend him. Then Jesus spoke to the 3rd commandment: “Thou shalt not swear falsely by my name, nor profane the name of thy God” Jesus explained that that meant “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” Jesus explained that even small things mattered, that swearing at all was offensive to God, for all creation belongs to God and that we must honor all of it.

Well, I don’t know about us all, but I thought that we were heeding the law as it had been explained to us, but Jesus taught us to examine not just our actions but also our motives. I began searching my heart. I wanted to be pleasing to God, and I thought I had lived by God’s laws. But Jesus taught us that it was not as easy as living by the letter of the law. We had to search our hearts and live in the spirit of the law first.

What is the difference between the wisdom of the other religious teachers of the 1st century and Jesus’s teachings? The Pharisees had taught that what a person did, what showed to the world, what was on the outside is what was important. Jesus taught that what God really intended with the law was and is for God’s people – for us – to be pure of heart first and that would lead to right actions. Rather than works based righteousness, we should strive for a heart-based righteousness. Rather than outside in – we should live inside out.

What was in the heart of the men and women listening to Jesus expound on the 6th commandment? Our first century woman heard a message that was nothing short of revelatory – and liberating.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

In Jesus’s day Mosaic law allowing divorce had become little more than publicly sanctioned adultery. In reinterpreting the laws against adultery, Jesus expressed an ideal, an ideal to strive for, not a law to be obeyed at all costs. Mosaic law allowed for a woman to be cast aside by simply writing a certificate of divorce in front of only one male witness and presenting her with that notice. She and her children then would be on the street with no home – no means of support. Pharisaic law allowed a man immediate access to a legal separation and divorce at will, so that he could remarry at once if another woman struck his fancy or if say his wife burned dinner. This clearly is not what God intended. How was a divorced woman to survive in Jewish society? It would be very difficult. She would have to remarry if she could find someone willing to marry a divorcee. However, under the law she would then become an adulteress.³ The fault under Pharisaic law was hers. And remarriage would be tantamount to committing adultery for her and new husband, when the responsibility and sin really should have rested on her first husband. Jesus was protecting women by limiting the means for divorce so that women and their children would not suffer at the hands of their husbands.

The sun must have been hot that day on the mountain, and it was crowded. The people must have been getting restless, so Jesus used a common speech technique of Jewish hyperbole to get the attention of the crowd whose concentration might have been waning: Jesus said “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out ...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away....” And the woman on the mountaintop must have

thought: *This Jesus, he is clever getting us to listen to him. And we listened, didn't we? Imagine our surprise, our delight to have Jesus offer us – both men and women – protection from the law as the Jewish leaders had interpreted God's message sent through Moses. He said that even if a man looks on a woman who is not his wife and he desires her then he has already sinned. That really got my husband's attention and that of everyone else on the mountain.*

By redefining adultery, Jesus offered protection for women in marriage, but he also sanctified the state of marriage itself. And men and women who live in Holy Marriages still look to this teaching Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount, and we try to live up to those ideals.

In an interview decades ago President Carter admitted: "I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart.... This is something that God recognizes I will do and I have done it and God forgives me for it." Jimmy Carter has taught Sunday School since he was 18 years old and a first year cadet at the Naval Academy. He and his wife still teach Sunday School in Plains, Georgia. He is a good-hearted man who tries to live up to the ideals that Jesus taught. I am certain that he searches his heart and strives to live in a manner that is within God's law. But he is human, as we all are.

If we try to live inside out with our hearts driving our actions then God will be pleased. But, my friends, when we fail, we can be assured of God's forgiveness.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ See Matthew 4:25.

² See Matthew 5:17.

³ See Deuteronomy 24:1–4.