

But I Say to You
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
February 16, 2014

First Lesson: Psalm 119:1-8

- ¹ Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.
² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.
⁴ You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
⁵ O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
⁶ Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
⁸ I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.

Second Lesson: Matthew 5:21-37

- ²¹ ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.
- ²⁷ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If 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. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.
- ³¹ ‘It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” ³²But 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.
- ³³ ‘Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

The psalm reading this week is an excerpt from a much longer psalm, in fact the longest psalm. It's one of a few which are in the form of an acrostic, traveling through the Hebrew alphabet of twenty-two letters and serving as a teaching tool. Other acrostic psalms often devote two or three lines to each letter; Psalm 119 gives each letter eight lines, accounting for its significant length at 176 lines. Today we begin at the beginning, with eight lines which begin with *alef*. The topic being taught by the psalm? The goodness of Torah, what we know as the first five books of the Bible, what translates to “the law” in Hebrew. We jump right into the teaching about the goodness of Torah, using synonyms like “way” (used twenty-five times), “law” (used twenty-five times), “precepts” (used twenty-one times), “statutes” (used twenty-two times), “commandments” (used twenty-two times), and “ordinances” (used fourteen times). What we are learning about is the joy we receive by following the law.

We go from that reading to Matthew where Jesus is naming commandments and explaining how following them as written is not enough. It might seem like our psalm is negated – if following the commandments is not enough, how can following them make one blameless and happy? Remember, though, last week's reading from Matthew, in the text which immediately precedes today's reading: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”¹ So how do we understand what Jesus is teaching? These readings actually support one another and call people to the same life in God.

As Professor Kevin Wilson explains, “Psalm 119 expresses the Israelites' joy at having the perfect guidance the Torah provides...the Torah was the greatest gift any nation had ever received.”² Walter Brueggemann writes: “The torah becomes a point of entry for exploring the whole range of interactions with [YHWH]...A life of full obedience is not a conclusion of faith. It is a beginning point and an access to a life filled with many-sided communion with God.”³ We may think of following rules as drudgery, even a restriction on our own free will, but the Torah was embraced as the guide to become closer to the God who created and creates, the God worthy of worship. For the Israelites of the psalms, “The connection between ethical behavior and the worship of God is strong. Only with a heart that is obedient to the law can God be worshipped in a worthy manner.”⁴

The Israelites of the psalms are not the same Israelites of the time of Christ, though. By then they had lost their way. Following the law had become a way to maintain purity and attain righteousness. The relationship with God was not at the forefront and, to Jesus' mind, the relationships with one another suffered as well. Each of the four correctives, about murder, adultery, divorce, and

¹ Matthew 5:17

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 345.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 349, Wilson.

swearing, are offered not to force more stringent obedience but to nurture relationships. The law is not, and never was, about avoiding sin so much as it is about living in right relationship with God and with neighbor. For example, the first four commandments – no other gods before me, no idols, not taking the name of the Lord in vain, keep holy the Sabbath – teach us about being in relationship with God. The last six – honor father and mother, do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness against a neighbor, do not covet that of your neighbor – teach us about being in relationship with one another. This true purpose, lived and remembered by earlier Israelites, had been forgotten or, at the very least, neglected.

Jesus spoke that those who heard him might remember the joy in being closer to God and to one another. What seem like extreme demands are not but, instead, are ways of getting to the root cause which leads to the breaking of the commandments. It needs to be said that Jesus, while telling us not to be angry, to lust, and to swear, is not condemning anger, lust, or even swearing. The cautions relate to how we act upon our natural human urges and reactions. Let's look at them one-by-one.

The commandment is “You shall not murder” but Jesus says, “don't be angry, don't insult, don't call another a fool.” Jesus says, “If someone is holding something against you, go be reconciled.” What Jesus is saying is “don't act upon the anger you feel and, if someone is angry with you, do what you can to make it right.” The law serves not only to help us avoid breaking relationships but it also serves to teach us how to be part of active healing. We read the Torah as a prescription to keep from breaking relationship. We read Matthew to help us mend what will inevitably become broken because we do not always succeed in keeping the commandments.

The commandment is “You shall not commit adultery” but Jesus says, “don't look at a woman with lust” and “do not divorce a woman and cause her to commit adultery” and “do not marry a divorced woman and thus commit adultery.” On this I bow to explanation of the wise. Professor Edwin Chr. Van Driel translates the Greek to “‘Everyone looking upon a woman *in order* to lust after her' commits adultery.”⁵ Again it comes back to how we act upon our natural human urges and reactions. We make a choice to linger in a thought like lust or to dwell on a feeling like anger.

As for the decree on divorce, Van Driel explains: “Torah makes allowance for divorce, but Jesus characterizes this provision as made for the sake of human hard-heartedness. This is in line with other passages both from the Torah (Deut. 24:4 and Lev. 21:7, which forbids priests to marry divorcees) and the prophets (Ezek. 44:22, Mal. 2:16 [in which God says: ‘I hate divorce’]).”⁶ In the statement on not

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 359.

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 359, 361.

divorcing a woman or marrying a woman who is divorced lest one or both commit adultery, “Jesus urges all of Israel to be a nation of priests.”⁷

How does this impact our understanding of divorce? Divorce was understood to be right in some circumstances. In the time of the Torah, in the circumstances where men chose to get rid of their property, their wives, for any reason other than that they were unfaithful, the reason was not acceptable in God’s eyes because the relationship is broken under false pretenses and thus not really broken. Marrying a woman who had been divorced this way was to marry a woman who was still in relationship with the husband who wrongly divorced her. Specific rules were laid out for priests to keep them holy and in right relationship with God. To remain holy meant the priests had to stay away from those who were not holy themselves, thus the forbidding of unclean people in the temple. If the circumstances of divorce were even slightly questionable, the priests could not take the risk. Jesus is urging the hearer to not insert themselves into relationships which might have been broken under false pretenses and thus are not really broken. Our world, and our reasons for divorce, have changed – the list of legitimate reasons to divorce has grown and we have a great deal of transparency when a relationship is truly broken. Being divorced or being with someone who has been divorced today rarely involves the false pretenses of concern to God.

And the last commandment is “You shall not swear falsely” but Jesus says “you shall not swear at all but only say ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’” How on earth does this have to do with broken relationships or keeping them whole? You know the story of the boy who cried wolf, the child who lied so frequently that no one believed him when he told the truth. This fable is at the heart of this exhortation from Christ. If you are always a truth-teller, there will never be need to finish a statement with “I swear.” “I swear” tends to get tacked on when the speaker senses doubt in the hearer. So let your words be true all the time that you might be trusted in all things, for that leads to whole relationships.

Happy are those whose way is blameless for their relationships are whole. Happy are those who walk in the law of the Lord and happy are those who keep his decrees, because they understand that the law brings them closer to God and to others. Happy are those who seek him with their whole heart, because there is no room in their hearts to dwell on anger or to ponder lust or to devise lies. Happy are those who not only work to prevent broken relationships but who also seek to mend those which are broken. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Holy God, make us people who walk in your way. Amen.

⁷ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 361, Von Driel.