

**SLD02.12.17 6<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 5:21-37**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“What God’s Going For”**

**Matthew 5:21-37**

<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But 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. <sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Come 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. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If 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. <sup>30</sup> And 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.

<sup>31</sup> "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' <sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> "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.' <sup>34</sup> But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

You know that Willie Nelson song, 'All of Me?' "All of me, why not take all of me? Don't you see that I'm no good without you?" Actually, it's a jazz standard written by Marks and Simons in 1931 and performed by everybody from Ruth Etting to Eric Clapton, but I know it best from Nelson's album *Stardust*.

“All of me. Why not take all of me. Don’t you see that I’m no good without you. Take my arms I want to lose them. Take my lips, I’ll never use them.”

A broken hearted lover bemoans the departure of his beloved.

“You took the part that once was my heart  
So why not take all of me.”

A therapist I once had suggested listening to popular love songs as if God were singing them. Or, as if I were singing them to God. (And also, incidentally, to resist singing from the pulpit.)

Still, it’s an interesting exercise, addressing love songs to God. Try it some time. Imagine singing to God, ‘have I told you lately that I love you?’ or ‘Can’t take my eyes off of you...’ or ‘Maybe I’m amazed at the way you love me all the time.’

Or imagine God singing to you, ‘the first time ever I saw your face, I thought the sun rose in your eyes....’ Or ‘can’t take my eyes off of you...’ or ‘love me tender, love me true...’

Really, it’s not that crazy of an idea – God and us singing love songs to each other. Not only are the psalms full of such divine/human love songs, consider how often we project godly expectations on those we love, how much we want people to love us in a way that only God can, never mind how often we get angry or disappointed when they don’t. Believe me, shifting our cathexis, or emotional energy and investment, and expectations, away from our loved ones and onto to God would be doing *everybody* a favor.

But even if you can’t imagine feeling that intimately loving with God, don’t think for a minute that God doesn’t ‘feel’ that intimately loving with you. Everything about scripture is a love story about a sometimes frustrated, sometimes infuriated, but

invariably longing God who yearns, burns, hungers, craves, aches, and hankers after God's beloved ones, in a seemingly endless hope that God's love will one day be received, met, experienced, returned, fulfilled, completed, satisfied. I mean, look around: the whole universe is God's love song to us; why shouldn't we periodically hum back our affection from time to time? In a way, I suppose this is the real purpose of worship: to let God know that we see and appreciate God's love, and, yes, love God back.

But what's all this 'love talk' to do with the intense instructions in today's text about what to do and what not to do? Jesus says, "in ancient times, they said this, that, and the other, "but *I* say.... *They* said, 'don't murder.' But *I* say, 'don't even get angry.' *They* say, 'don't commit adultery.' *I* say 'whether you act on it or not, don't even *lust* after a person.' (okay, he says 'woman' but in this church we're equal opportunity sinners.) *They* say 'divorce is okay,' but *I* say, 'there's more at stake than you think.' *They* say, 'don't swear falsely.' *I* say, 'don't swear at all.' (Unless you're a pastor, in which case it may bring relief.)

And the consequences of not complying with what Jesus says do and not o? Why, the hell of fire, debtors' prison, and the slicing off of body parts, all Hebrew hyperbole that indicate 'and I *mean* it!'

But what is it, exactly, that Jesus means? What is it that he's working so hard to get across? Is his tirade really about the importance of rules and the consequences of not following them? Is he really arguing that if his hearers thought Leviticus was hard core, it doesn't hold a candle to the demands of the gospel?

I don't think so. I think what Jesus is going for is something a whole lot deeper than knowing the rules, and a whole lot harder than merely following them. What I believe Jesus is asking for here, and throughout the gospels, is for God seekers to align themselves fully with God's intentions, inside and out. Behaving correctly, doing the right thing, achieving 'righteousness,' whatever *that* means, well, on the continuum of faith, that's baby's milk. And as the writer of Hebrews says, "everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. (Heb. 5:13)

Following the rules, obeying the law, doing the 'right' things, to be sure there's a time and place for that, especially when you're a beginner – at school, at work, at life, at faith. But as Richard Rohr says, (whom I can't seem to preach a sermon these days without quoting), "spiritual maturity is largely a growth in seeing; and full seeing seems to take most of our lifetime." (p. 130) Growing up in God, aligning oneself with God inside and out, requires a relationship that deepens and grows over time.

Think about it: there's nothing intimate, or transformational, or even relational, about reading a guidebook and following its instructions, right? People who have worked hard over time to love each other well don't turn to a handbook to figure out how to respond to their beloved; rather, they turn to their gut, their heart, their intuition, to the relational wisdom that's accrued in them over years of, well, frankly, messing up. A lot. Inner alignment with another isn't a structure or a stricture, it's an orientation, an intention, a *relationship*. Which is what Jesus, the gospel, and God are all going for – not a set of rules but a relationship, an orientation, an inclination, a genuine alignment, inside and out, with the very One who loved us into life.

Believe me, rules are easier.

Instead of the Ten Commandments, try placing the Eight Beatitudes on the Court House steps and making rules of them!

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 5:3)  
Blessed are those who mourn: for they will be comforted. (5:4)  
Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth. (5:5)  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they will be filled. (5:6)  
Blessed are the merciful: for they will be shown mercy. (5:7)  
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God. (5:8)  
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they will be called children of God. (5:9)  
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:10)

Makes you long for a good, solid, simple, rule, doesn't it? But merely following the rules will never be enough to grow up in God. Look at the elder son in the parable of the prodigal son – wasn't he always following the rules? (Lk 15: 25-32) Or the tale of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple (Lk. 18-9-14), the Pharisee all righteous because he always did the 'right' thing, while the reviled tax collector who knew he was a sinner, was deemed 'at rights with God.'

Or, for that matter, look at how the Pharisees were forever accusing Jesus of breaking the rules - the rules of Sabbath, of cleanliness, of propriety, of social interaction, of *holiness*, for heaven's sake. Yet Jesus insists he didn't come to flaunt the law but to fulfill it. Looks like fulfilling the spirit of the law takes a whole lot more than merely following rules. Looks like God's always going for something deeper than what can be simply observed on the outside. Never mind what we do or say, who are we *really* in our heart of hearts? That's what God wants to know. And does know. Far more than in our outer behavior, God is interested in the disposition of our hearts. Because what God knows is that when our hearts are aligned with God's, right behavior will follow.

“Please, just tell me what to do to be righteous,” begged the rich ruler of Jesus. Only it doesn’t work that way. “There is still one thing lacking,” replied Jesus. And that ‘one thing’ is the alignment of the believer’s heart with the heart of God.

Still, I’m not meaning here to ‘dis’ rules. I may have a hard time following them sometimes but rules definitely have their place. In his book, Falling Upward, Richard Rohr rightly notes how, in the first half of life, when we are naturally and rightly preoccupied with establishing our identity and defining who we are and what we want out of life, rules are important. Indeed, they help us get through the first half of life safely, teaching us to look both ways before we cross the street, to cultivate impulse control, to respect boundaries, to learn to accept the bad news that we are not, in fact, the center of the universe. But the black-and-white-thinking of early life no longer serves when we move into the subtlety of mid- and later life. (pp. 45-47)

In the first half of life we are, like that ‘elder son’ in the parable, very loyal to strict meritocracy, to obedience and loyalty to the parent. In the third grade, Karen Mason was genuinely anxious for several days about the hell she was bound to experience due to the fact that she called another little girl ‘a fool.’

But in the second half of life, “there is a deeper voice of God which we must learn to follow, which will sound,” says Rohr, “an awful lot like the voices of risk, of trust, of surrender, of soul, of love, of intimacy, and of one’s deeper self. What’s more, he notes, it is only at this juncture that the true faith journey really beings. A journey invariably filled with contradictions and adventures and immense challenges. Wholeness and holiness,” says Rohr, “will always stretch us beyond our small comfort zone.” (p. 48)

“All of me, why not take all of me? Can you see how much more God wants from us than following the rules? And if you can, do you dare sing the song God *really* wants to hear from us? All of me. Why not take all of me? If we’re not singing this to God, we should be. Because, in the end, it’s what God is really going for – ALL of me and ALL of you, because really, ask Calvin, we’re flat no good without God.

To the glory of God. Amen.