

## Tough Love

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

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I'm not sure what the practice is now, but when I was in school, the time of year we students most dreaded was not report cards, but progress reports. These came out halfway through each quarter or semester, and were so much worse than report cards could be. Report cards just had grades on them – A's, B's, C's... but progress reports had *comments*. They were the place for teachers to write things like, "Elizabeth is a good student but she talks too much in class," or "Tommy might do better in English if he paid less attention to the girl who sits next to him." But the worst comment on those progress reports – the one we all dreaded getting and inevitably did get at one time or another at the little college prep school I attended was, "The student is not reaching his/her potential."

We *hated* that. We would read that on our reports and say, "How do you think you know what my potential is? What if this is the best I can do?" We were working hard – or we were at least working. And for our teachers to suggest that we should be doing better, that we could be doing better, was frustrating, to say the least.

I feel like that's kind of what we get in Matthew's gospel today. We're in the sermon on the mount – two weeks ago we heard Jesus give the beatitudes, and last week we heard that we're to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, more righteous than all the scribes and the Pharisees. And today we hear the beginning of a long series of statements by Jesus that begin with, "You have heard it said... but I say to you...". He's referencing the Torah, the law of the Old Testament, the scripture of the Jews, and giving a new interpretation of it. And it's clear that he expects *more* of his disciples than what they've been giving.

Jesus begins with this new interpretation of the command not to commit murder: "...I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or a 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." Yikes. I think we're all in trouble. He tells the disciples that if they realize that someone has something against them, they should seek reconciliation before coming to the altar of the Lord. He suggests that it doesn't matter whose fault it is, or who started it, but whoever *realizes* that there's something between you and another person is responsible to go and initiate reconciliation. This is why our full communion liturgy begins with a prayer of confession, and then has the passing of the peace. This is a time for us to confess our sins before God and each other, and then go and be reconciled with one another as we have need – to go to each other and offer peace before we come to the table. Passing the peace isn't just about greeting one another and saying, "Good morning" or telling people how much we like their Sunday outfits or talking about who won which game last night.

Of course, this is *not* to say that you have to have everything perfect in your life to come to church – or to come to the table of the Lord. All are welcome here who desire to grow in faith and in relationship with each other. That is the first step. But it does seem to me that in this instance, Jesus is saying that Christianity is as much about how we live with each other – how we relate to one another – as how we relate to God.

And then Jesus continues with a few sentences about adultery – and those lines that Jimmy Carter made famous in his Playboy interview in 1976 – that “everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” And Jesus suggests, perhaps hyperbolically, that if your eye causes you to sin, you should pluck it out. The same goes for your hand, or any other body part – “for it’s better to lose one of your members,” he says, “than for your whole body to go to hell.”

Now what on earth are we supposed to do with this? If we read it literally, then none of us will have many appendages before long, and certainly *no one* is going to want to join the church where you have to cut off all your body parts. That’s probably the worst church growth strategy ever. Maybe Jesus doesn’t literally mean that people should cut off their limbs each time they are tempted to sin, but he’s trying to get an important message across to his disciples.

Remember that Jesus has just told the disciples that he’s come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. So he’s not trying to overturn what’s in the Torah, but he’s obviously offering some kind of new interpretation of it. And if you think about what we heard last week, looking at the text from Isaiah, we explored the idea that God doesn’t want us to just go through the motions of religiosity, but wants the worship and liturgy and spiritual practice in which we participate to change us so that we might live differently, and in doing so, transform the world. And I think this passage follows closely behind: that following the law isn’t enough anymore. Upholding the 613 regulations in the Old Testament isn’t what God is asking of us. We can check off the boxes, do the minimum requirements—even if they’re pretty strict—and that’s not enough. God is asking for more. It’s like Jesus is saying to his disciples, “You’re doing a pretty good job, but you’re just not living up to your potential.”

I have said many times – and have heard friends and colleagues say many times – that I wish I could go back to college and start over. I missed *so much* not because I was running around being stupid, though I did miss some things because I was running around being stupid – but because I didn’t live up to my potential. I did the assignments, I crammed for the tests, I passed the classes, I got good grades, I earned my degree. But there is so much I could have *learned* if I would have stopped worrying about meeting requirements and let the knowledge floating all around me seep into my mind. I could have grown by leaps and bounds if I had taken advantage of conversations with some of the most brilliant professors I will ever know. I could have matured emotionally beyond my years had I let the characters in my fiction and poetry classes into my heart. But I read to complete assignments, and I studied to ace tests. I didn’t read to grow or study to learn. I didn’t reach my potential.

And I think that happens with us as Christians, too. We think there’s a set of rules to follow, and we do the bare minimum. We go to church a couple times a month – or even every Sunday, and we feel pretty good about that. Now and then we put a check in the offering plate, buy something for a youth fundraiser, or attend a Bible Study class or a small group. Sometimes we bake cookies for coffee hour. Those things all get us a passing grade. But Jesus is asking for more.

Christ wants us to take our faith to heart, not just to observe the laws of the Bible outwardly. He wants us to live out our faith with our lives, not check a bunch of regulations off a list. Christianity is less about following rules and more about orienting our hearts toward God and one another. Or as Deitrich Bonhoeffer put it, “Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God’s will.” Jesus is saying in this passage, “You’re

proud of yourselves because you don't kill each other – do you really think that's enough?" Work on your hearts. Work on your relationships. Work on loving more abundantly.

The Hebrew word for 'law' is the same as the word for 'walk.' I think that's a beautiful illustration of the theme today. We can focus on the faith as a series of laws, and get by – or, we can walk with God and reach toward holiness. It's up to us. As we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy today, God has set before us a choice – and suggests that we choose life, loving the Lord, obeying God and holding fast to God, walking with God, following God's will, striving to become more and more like Christ, in covenant relationship with the one who offers us abundant grace.

The more I've read this passage this week, the more I've gotten the sense of how much Jesus loved the disciples – and how much God loves us. And perhaps it's cliché, but I hear in my head the words of so many parents when they're disciplining their children and they say, "This hurts me more than it hurts you." The kids are thinking, "Yah, right." But as a parent, I'm learning that this is true. But we discipline our children, we push our children, we have high expectations of our children, because we love them, and because we know who they are – children of God, holy and beloved, with God able to accomplish far more than they can imagine on their own. "Tough love," we call it. And I think that's the situation with Jesus and the disciples here. He loves them more than he can say, and he knows that they are beloved, created in God's image, chosen people, a holy priesthood. So he wants more. He asks them to be who they are called to be, children of the new covenant, who strive in all things to love God and each other, beyond the written rules of the Torah. He asks them to orient their hearts toward the God who walks with them. He tells them they have far more potential than they realize. And he says the same to us: "You're proud of yourselves because you've followed the rules?" No. God wants more. God *expects* more. God wants your whole heart.

Amen.