

**February 16, 2020 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**

Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Matthew 5:21-37

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the fifth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 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 gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Today, as are gathered here,
around the feast at this table,
and around God's sacred word...
there is another gathering going on here, too...
of Godly Play guides from Central and Southeast Texas.
It began yesterday...and continues this afternoon and into tomorrow...
pausing long enough for worship this morning.
That circle is learning about the Godly Play process
for children's spiritual formation,
which we use here at Peace on Sunday mornings...(and other times).

Godly Play is all about circles...
the circle of the church's time...
the spiraling circle of the stories we hear year after year...
the circle of the cycle of creativity...
and the circle of children
where we make meaning together of God's stories
and our lives.

I bring this all up because I can't help but hear the words of Scripture this week
through the language and practice of these stories
and this journey called Godly Play.

Jesus' words today are hard ones...
but when I hear them and Moses' words in Deuteronomy –
at the end of his life and his wilderness journey with God's people,
that story of the Ten Best Ways to Live...
of the Ten Commandments rings in my ears...

A few weeks ago in worship,
we heard about how the writer of Matthew's gospel
wants us to see in Jesus a new and renewed presence of Moses...
who helped lead God's people out of Egypt...
through the waters of freedom...
and into a new life.

On their long journey to the land God promised,

they needed help understanding how to live together.
So God gave them that gift of the Ten Best Ways.

When we think of them as commandments, as we most often do,
they can begin to feel like a long list of line items...
tasks to accomplish...
requirements to meet.

But it is fitting today that we receive this new interpretation of Moses' law
as we are sitting in our own sort of circle...
because they aren't really a long line of a to-do (or not-to-do) list.
They are more like a circle of safety...
a way to stay connected to one another in community.

When we think of God's commandments that way...
a way to keep the circle of beloved community safe and whole...
they feel less like laws...and more like gifts.
This is what Moses is trying to tell the people in Deuteronomy.
He tells them he wants them to live...that God wants them to live...
fully and joyfully...
that God has given them a way to life and prosperity...
and that there are also ways that will lead to death and adversity...
to struggle and conflict.
He pleads with them to understand the gift of God's word...
which is the way to life.

But this is a hard thing to understand.

We still don't really understand it.

Our Godly Play trainer, Pastor Sharolyn,
told us yesterday about one day in the circle of children...
how the story of the Ten Best Ways had been laid out
in the sand of the desert.

The placards with those Ten Best Ways on them are each written
on a half of a heart that stands up in the sand.

When the children wondered aloud together
about what part of those ten best ways they could maybe leave out,
one child suggested that maybe it would be okay to leave out "don't lie."
And another child responded severely,
"Oh no. We can't leave that one out.
That's the one I'm buried under."

Those half hearts in the desert...
they do look a little bit like tombstones.
Sometimes those words feel like they might bury us.
Maybe sometimes they really do.

Today, it seems like Jesus is trying to make sure we *all* feel buried
under the weight of these words.
Or at least...if we treat them like a list of things we can actually do...
we will end up buried...every single one of us.
Maybe the one that feels like your tombstone isn't "don't lie."
Maybe it is the commandment that we paraphrase in the Ten Best Ways
to read "don't break your marriage."
So many of us carry with us the pain and shame of relationships of ours
that are or have been broken...

If you are buried today in brokenness...
I want you to know that Jesus did not speak a single word of today's gospel
so that you would have to bear the weight of someone else's breaking.
It isn't yours to carry.

And I hope you also know...
that if you feel buried under any breaking of your own doing...
that God doesn't give us these words to bury us.
God gives them to us to bring us back to life.
To pull us out of our graves.
To give us back to one another.
To make the circle of all God's beloved ones whole again
across all time and space.
These are words to build the circle again when we have broken it into pieces.

We also say in Godly Play that these Ten Best Ways are hard...
but God did not say these would be ten *easy* ways to live...
only that they are the best ones.
Maybe they are tombstones and hearts both at once....
but God never leaves us in our tombs.

Then and now,
from the time of Moses to the time of Jesus,
from the great family's first parents - Abraham and Sarah -
to your own...
God loves us...all of us...

and wants us all to have a place in the great circle of God's children...
and from that great gift, we are made able to love God and others.

May this circle be unbroken.

And when we break it...and when we are broken...
may we see the love that reaches beyond the tomb
to claim us and restore us
to God and to one another.

Because we are all heirs of these promises and gifts
given to our ancestors in faith.

We are all part of the great family that is as many as the stars in the sky
and the grains of sand in the desert.

Thanks be to God. Amen.