

“Matters of the Heart”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
February 12, 2023

---

Sirach 15:15-20 Matthew 5:21-37

This Sunday continues Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. But unlike the Beatitudes two weeks ago— the series where Jesus says “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God— and unlike the sayings Jesus offered, “You are the salt of the earth, O people! You are the light of the world”— you won’t find *these* sayings from today’s gospel written on inspirational cards, memorized on the lips of the faithful, or proclaimed at funerals.

The words given in today’s gospel have more fire to them. Maybe they even made you squirm a little bit in your pews. I know I’ve been doing some squirming as they were read— they have caused that for decades for me, since Jesus specifically called out divorce. As a child of divorced parents, even hearing this passage as a child made me feel like my family was out of line with what Jesus expected.

Jesus tells us what we know the law says— you should not commit murder. But when Jesus then tells us that if we are angry with our brother and sister, we are liable for judgment— my seat got a little squirmy. Because on Friday night, when a drunk driver barreled into our parked car, flipping his own car and wrecking ours— I can say that while I was thankful that my family wasn’t in the car, and no one— including the drunk driver— was injured, I am still angry over what choices this man made. Our car was in front of the middle school, and only minutes before the crash happened my daughter and her teammates from soccer were climbing out of their cars to go to soccer practice. Only a few minutes earlier, it could have been any of those girls or their parents that car could have landed on. And that makes me mad, mad.

And we know the law says not to commit adultery. I value the commitment to monogamy couples make; when I counsel couples getting ready for marriage, I always put that on the table: Do you share the values of monogamy, meaning you will reserve a special kind of intimacy for your spouse only? And if that commitment ever fails, how do you think you will handle that? It’s important to think about— and I know some couples who have experienced infidelity, and it has broken their marriage, and other couples who have had that experience but were able to work through it.

But Jesus tells us that even *looking* at another person with lust in your heart is just the same as adultery. Not only that, but if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. We talk about the Taliban being extreme, but aren’t these sayings of Jesus right in line? With this level of expectation, what are we to do with the constant bombardment of images— whether on Netflix, the Internet, music videos, that infuse our lives?

I'm going to a Super Bowl party later today. I'm less interested in the actual game than I am in the party food, the commercials, and the halftime show: A parade of skin and flesh finely choreographed to entice the desires of a broad audience, no matter what their gender or sexual orientation. I have to say, I'm looking forward to it.

There's been a lot of hype about a huge advertisement campaign that will appear during the Superbowl commercials. It's a slogan about Jesus— "He gets us." The target audience is religious skeptics. The multi-million dollar campaign will try to show the relevance of Jesus in today's world. One commercial shows refugees fleeing Central American villages besieged by violence. The voiceover narrator says, "One day, they heard the head of their country was sending soldiers to their town because he thought they were part of an insurrection," The photos start to depict scenes of panicked flight through village streets and jungle roads, the faces of the family become anguished. "They were scared, hungry, and exhausted." Then the ad takes a turn: "But they were far away from the atrocities taking place... in Bethlehem." On the screen, words flash in minimalist white: "Jesus was a refugee."<sup>1</sup>

"He gets us." Now, it sounds like a commercial that will really move me; I'm not a refugee, but I want to believe in a God who is empathetic with people who are. I understand this ad campaign is paid for by some groups that are anti women's reproductive rights, anti LGBTQ rights and that makes me cringe a little bit. But I agree with their message— "He gets us." And mostly that's how I feel about Jesus. *He gets us.*

But I'm not so sure about *this*. You see, I am feeling a little feisty with Jesus and I really truly wish that he were among us— not in the "church is the body of Christ" kind of way but in the "I want to have a real conversation with you, like the scribes and the Pharisees did." And Jesus, I promise not to rat you out to the Roman authorities, no matter how scandalous your responses to me are.

I'd like to ask the congregation something: I want to ask if anyone in here, or watching online, has never been angry? Who has never said, "I swear."? Who has never looked at someone you weren't committed to, and done a double-take because that person looks so good that some kind of yearning has stirred within you? Who has never been angry, with anyone? If there is anyone here, who has never done any of these things, please stand up. We will make you the first Presbyterian pope. And also, I accuse you of lying.

*How are you going to have any followers*, Jesus, if your words seem to cancel out all our human tendencies?

For each of the sayings the Hebrew law gives us, Jesus takes it to a new level: It is written, "You shall not murder." *But* I say to you...

---

<sup>1</sup>Molly Olmstead, "The Backstory to the Jesus Ad Coming to the Super Bowl" on Slate.com Feb. 11, 2023 <https://slate.com/human-interest/2023/02/jesus-ad-superbowl-he-gets-us.html>

“You shall not commit adultery. *But* I say to you...  
If you get a divorce, you have to have a certificate. *But* I say to you...  
You shall not swear falsely. *But* I say to you...

I wonder, how big was Jesus’ “*But*.” How much were these extra levels to the law a religious requirement? How much were they a spiritual and philosophical exercise?

Considering that upon examining Jesus’ “*But*” phrases, no listener could possibly remain standing— even then, before Netflix, I am pretty certain no one listening could have been pure of all the examples of unrighteousness Jesus was giving— I cannot imagine that Jesus could hold these as a requirement to faithfulness.

Instead, I think Jesus offered these “*but*s” for two reasons. They are each matters of the heart— that is, calling us to live into a deeper experience of love.

One reason: Jesus wanted to increase our **empathy**.

Most all of us know what it is like to be driven to a state of yearning due to attraction to someone else. It could be someone in your daily life. It could be a celebrity on screen. I watched the Grammy’s last week, and there was a piece that interviewed the nominees biggest fan. They interviewed a grandmother who had a huge crush on Harry Styles. The improbability of it, due to the grandmother’s age and her ordinariness and maybe her gender too— compared to Harry Styles’ age of one or two generations younger, his global celebrity status, and his status of “sexiest singer alive” by Glamour magazine made it a safe and improbable match that added some humor to the night.

God made us as sexual beings, and that’s not a bad thing. Most of us are wired to see beauty and attraction and respond to that in a bodily way. But what isn’t humorous is that I have been on the receiving end of being looked like, or handled, or treated like a piece of meat. I can tell you it does not feel good. Many of you know firsthand how awful that feels. And so maybe Jesus’ push on this saying about lust makes us consider that we also need to be respectful of people, and when we do feel the draw of attraction to them, to make sure our actions never cross the line to harrassment or exploitation.

Divorce is real today as it was in Jesus’ day, and I know we have a number of church members who have lived through divorce. In Jesus’ time, divorce was allowed, but the Jewish laws on divorce favored the rights and autonomy of the man only. He could divorce her for whatever reason he wants—in Deuteronomy 24, it just says he may find “something objectionable about her,” – for example, if he doesn’t like what she made for dinner, he has to write a certificate of divorce, and then he can be done with the marriage. Women were not given the right to initiate a divorce, but if a man divorced a woman, she was left in economic, social, and physical vulnerability. In this way, Jesus’ teaching about divorce was just as empathetic as him stepping in to keep an adulterous woman from being stoned. Our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship actually offers a Prayer for the End of Marriage. I wouldn’t suggest this prayer if a

relationship is ending because of abuse. But *if* both people in the divorce are safe, I like this prayer as a reminder that if a marriage has to come to an end, that the individuals can ask God's help to return to a place of respect and justice and care— even as they enter into separate lives.

When Jesus tells us we can't just feel good about ourselves for not being murderers, but we have to find a way to put our anger to rest before we approach the altar with our offerings, that's a tough one. Like I said, I'm still mad at the drunk driver who wrecked our car Friday night. But while I was watching the young man get examined by the police, asked to walk in a straight line and a number of other sobriety tests, I also felt the smallest tug of empathy for him. He will face huge consequences for his choices that may also ripple out to his family too. He was probably grappling with the fact that he could have easily lost his life, or taken out someone else's life, that night. The truth is, while I'm not a big drinker, I know that I am not pure from making bad choices behind the wheel, whether it's been speeding or sending a text while driving. I know that a combination of lack of caution on my part and lack of luck could also end up in a terrible accident. I'm still mad at him, but at the same time I am humbled by my own capacity for causing harm, and I'm committed to driving a little more carefully.

A second reason: Jesus wanted us to understand **grace**. Remember, no one in Jesus' audience today, or two thousand years ago, was pure from all the things Jesus warned us about. But knowing you'll fail at something shouldn't mean that you don't even try. Grace— the assurance that God's love doesn't rely on how much we deserve it— frees us from that fear of failure, so that we can try to act from the goodness God set within us, even when we know we won't always get it right. We don't always get to paint ourselves as the good guys in the story, and we need to be humble enough to accept that, and let God's love and grace help us to be better.

It is a matter of the heart: will we be able to do the bare minimum of what our faith asks of us? Or can we consider moving to a deeper experience of love, one that challenges, one that we will fail at often— yes. But also an experience and practice of love that brings us into deeper empathy and deeper grace. Jesus can love like that, and amazingly, he believes we can, too.