

February 12, 2017
The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

“Have a Heart”
by Mary Anne Biggs

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 ~ Matthew 5:21-37

The story goes that one day Abraham invited a beggar to his tent for a meal. When grace was being said the man began to curse God ... declaring that he could not bear to hear his name. Seized with indignation, Abraham drove the blasphemer away. When he was at his prayers that night, God said to him, "That man has cursed and reviled me for fifty years, and yet I have given him food to eat every day. Could you not put up with him for a single meal?"

In light of that story, my words to you this morning ... two days before St. Valentine's Day ... are simply this ... love each other. Love each other ... not with the love that depends on chemistry, mood, and feelings. Nor even with the love that depends on the behavior of others ... but love each other with the kind of love that Christ refers to in today's continued reading from the Sermon on the Mount.

You know the kind of love I mean ... it is the love that goes beyond what seems right according to the letter of the law ... it is the love that enters into the Spirit of what God wants for us ... it is the love that enters into feeding others ... it is the love that enters into healing others ... it is the love that enters into showing grace to others ... it is the love that enters into giving peace to others. It's the love that values others ... regardless of who they are ... or what they have ... or have not done.

Someone once discovered WC Fields reading the Bible. "What are you doing?" asked the person. "Looking for loopholes." growled Fields. Well my friends, with all the love in my heart, I tell you ... there are no loopholes ... no escape hatches ... no clauses that say the deal can be revoked if this or that condition is not met. Love is total ... it is unconditional ... or it is not love at all.

Think of the words of Jesus we heard a few minutes ago. They were words addressed to a people who were used to compromising. They were words addressed to a people who were used to altering love's demands as they are found in the law of God ... so that those demands would be easier to fulfill. Jesus doesn't criticize them because they are interested in God's law ... he criticizes them because they've gone about things the wrong way. They were interested in the outcome ... God was interested in the attitude. Throughout his life, Jesus showed us how the law of God should be lived. He showed us again and again that it must be lived from the heart ... and we may need to have "spiritual heart surgery" because living in the God's Kingdom demands that kind of change! Jesus didn't pull any punches ... in essence he told them, I know what you are used to, but there's a new sheriff in town. *"You have heard it was said you shall not murder ... but I say to you that if you are angry with your brother or sister ... you will be liable to judgment. You have*

heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery ... but I tell you that everyone who looks with lust at another has already committed adultery.”

There are no loopholes to be found in Jesus' words ... no compromises ... no deals ... no escape hatches. What Jesus does is crystallize the issues involved in loving God and our neighbor so that we can know ... without doubt ... just where we stand ... and exactly what we need to aim for. Think about where you stand for a minute. Think about how you love others and then ask yourself ... is my love up to the standards set by Christ?

You and I can sit here comfortably while Jesus talks about murder. But suddenly Jesus widens the net ... and we're caught. 'Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.' Who hasn't been angry? Who hasn't cursed or muttered something about someone else ... perhaps even about someone here today in church? What kind of impossible standard is Jesus laying down? It's not so hard to evade the letter of the law ... to make ourselves as small a target as possible. Murder is a big thing. But anger. Everyone gets angry.

And Jesus knows that even if we keep the commandment not to kill, we can still hate and despise others. We can follow the rule and still kill relationships ... still treat people as if they were dead to us. Jesus shows us that the fulfillment of the commandment not to kill is the formation of our hearts and minds so that we look at others *not* with anger, but rather *with* love. The greater righteousness is to love others as we would have them love us ... even when they are our enemies. The commandment is given not just so that we won't kill each other ... but so that we will be the type of people who will seek out someone who has wronged us ... and work to be reconciled with them.

Or what about the other commandment that Jesus focuses upon. 'You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' Does that mean that if I haven't committed adultery that I'm safe? No, Jesus says. 'I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' It's not just the act but also the attitude. If we haven't committed adultery ... and we have felt pretty righteous about this ... Jesus asks us to consider what we have wanted to do.

He knows that even if we keep the commandment not to commit adultery, we can still demean and belittle others. The lustful glance treats others as objects and takes what doesn't belong to us ... even if it keeps its distance. Jesus shows us that the fulfillment of the commandment not to commit adultery is a faithful heart that cherishes our spouses and respects our neighbors.

It's time to take stock of our lives. The amazing reality of God's *assured forgiveness* means that we can honestly confront our failures. We can address our anger at our spouse ... our simmering disputes with other people ... our threats and spiteful words against workmates and schoolmates ... our lustful thoughts, even the act of murder or adultery itself.

We can acknowledge the sad dissolution and breakdown of our marriage, which breaks our promise of a life-long union. And I beg you to hear me ... not all marriages are holy and not all marriages are safe. Too many people have been counseled to remain in dangerous marriages because of a misguided interpretation of this scripture. Jesus was talking about relationships here in a time when the law said that a man could divorce his wife at will ... and by doing so leave her destitute and victimized. Jesus was admonishing his followers to look past the Law. He wants them ... and he wants us ... to regard each other as God regards us ... and thereby to treat each other accordingly. In this way Jesus calls us to envision life in God's kingdom as constituted not by obeying laws ... but rather by holding the welfare of our neighbors close to our hearts while trusting that they are doing the same for us. Jesus today brings all this to our attention. We can let God's word convict us and lead us to say, 'I'm sorry.' It's then that we are freed from our failures, and we can begin again ... fresh and energized.

Consider who holds a grudge against you because of something you did or said ... something for which you have not apologized? What promises and vows have you broken and then justified yourself in doing so? When was the last time you criticized immigrants for stealing all the jobs in this country ... or expressed your dislike for the person who took the promotion ... or even the parking place ... that belonged to you? Most of us only love our friends and our family ... and we are not sure about our family at times.

We greet those who greet us ... we do good to those who do good to us ... we lend to those who will pay us back ... we welcome those who welcome us. As for everyone else ... well ... if asked, most of us have a reason for what we do ... and an excuse for what we do not do.

What we must aim for as Christians is to break through the limitations of our excuses. We must aim to destroy all the reasons that we might offer to treat one person as less than another. We must aim to enter into relationships with each other that are based upon our equality before God, and work diligently to bring that to fruition ...until it becomes as natural to us as breathing.

L. Gregory Jones, in an essay entitled "*The Grace of Daily Obligation: Shaping Christian Life*," reflects on how we become grace-filled people through the daily and disciplined practice of Christian obligations. He writes:

"Isn't it interesting that when we are talking about a ballet dancer, or, if you prefer, a Michael Jordan on the basketball court ... we describe them as being graceful – full of grace. Yet anybody who has ever undertaken the craft of ballet or piano or basketball knows how much work day by day by day goes into the cultivation of that gracefulness. In this sense, gracefulness is not simply a process of sitting back and waiting. Rather, through the activity of daily habits people are prepared to move gracefully ... in a way that transcends the day-to-day preparation. It becomes so natural that the graceful performer doesn't have to think it through. ... The gracefulness develops over time so that eventually the steps come together in a powerfully new way, a performance. That happens only through daily obligation."

Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus came to call and form disciples in a community devoted to the higher righteousness. We follow the commandments not simply because they are rules ... we follow the commandments so that we might become the type of people Christ wants us to be ... people formed and fashioned for life in the kingdom of God.

I began this sermon with a story and I will close with another. An old pilgrim was making his way to the Himalayan Mountains in the bitter cold of winter when it began to rain. An inn keeper said to him, "How will you ever get there in this kind of weather my good man?" The old man answered cheerfully ... "My heart got there first, so it's easy for the rest of me to follow."

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches that we can meet all the demands of love that are expressed in the law in one way ... and only in one way. We can do so if we our hearts go there first. So today, right before Valentine's Day ... I urge you ... let your hearts go there first ... love God ...and love each other ... as gracefully as you can ... as deeply as you can.

When you do you will find, that no matter how many mistakes you may make on the way, that goodness and blessedness will blossom along your path, and all that God has planned will come to pass.

May we pray?

Ever loving God, the sound of our hearts ... and the sound of your heart ... are different now. They're meant to sing the same song. But when we fail ... because we do fail ... we are given the key to your heart ... the key to the vast treasure of your mercy that stands ready for us to take. Your heart offers us true pleasure, true love. We can take heart because you are a God of love. You are love. In that we can be sure. Amen.