

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20

PSALM 119:1-8

I CORINTHIANS 3:1-9

MATTHEW 5:21-37

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany; Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 12, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

***One Rule and One Rule Only: Be Loving!***

So, once again we prepare to celebrate a non-liturgical holiday but a day nonetheless that has the uncanny ability to work so well for us in a Sunday worship service. During this first setting of the two rounds of Ordinary Time that make up the longest seasons of the Church Year, this grand tradition fits quite nicely. It is an observance that not only works well, seamlessly echoing our theology, but strongly reinforcing who and what we believe our God to be, the essence of eternal love. Every year people everywhere celebrate February 14<sup>th</sup>, the day called **Valentine's Day**, a day that actually honors a third century Roman Catholic saint, **St. Valentine**, San Valentino, for those preferring Italian, Valentinus, or those who prefer Latin—pick your preference. As with Christmas Day the Eastern Orthodox commemorate a different day as they honor this real-life patron saint of history, celebrating this festival of love on July 6<sup>th</sup>. Inquiring minds may not have wanted to know! It is kind of funny how we Protestants poo-poo the many figures throughout history who have been venerated as saints until their sainthood suits our fancy, giving us an excuse to join in some Roman Catholic fun, kicks and giggles! For many star-crossed lovers this is a day of absolute delight, a day to relish relationships of the most intimate variety. For some of us it is a day we would just as soon forget! Perhaps the most horrible day of the year! But I digress; I often do! That whiny commentary being acknowledged, as we gather in this sacred setting as beloved faith community, **(today) we are reminded that God loves us, all of us, and that God is love, loving us completely and unconditionally, and that we are called to share that agape, God's love, with each other and with the world, knowing as well the value of eros, romantic**

**love—yes, I do remember; once upon a time—and phileo, friendship, as necessary loving ways to get us through life. Yes, it is all Greek to me!**

**As with many texts within the biblical narrative, Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures alike, we are constantly bombarded by a long laundry list of dos and don'ts, a litany of commandments telling us how to act, how to behave, how to live and get along in the world.** One of the critiques or condemnations by ready and willing critics outside the Christian faith is that we, by and large, have always been and continue to be obsessed with sin, sins, sinfulness, and sinning! Guilty as charged, guilt being the operative word here! It is a reminder that we are not that far removed from our Medieval forebears, followed by our New England Congregationalist Puritan fun-haters and party poopers, whose words of warning were filled with judgement and punishment, telling us that the repercussions of our wrongful actions would place us in jeopardy, risking an eternity without God. Yes, some still hang on to the bizarre theology of purgatory, a slippery slope one degree removed, one slippery step above the fires of hell. I will never forget the first time I read the epic sermon by the First Great Awakening preacher Jonathan Edwards, his "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" haunting readers then and now but long considered a classic example of early American literature. The stark image of an unrepentant sinner being held as if by a single thread, one strand of a spider's web, suspended over the fiery brimstone simmering and bubbling below, a cauldron of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, these demonically driven images were a graphic reminder of our precarious predicament, enough to make the most stubbornly unrepentant backslider see the error of their evil and wicked ways, more than compelling them, yes, coercing them, to quickly change their spots lest the devil take possession of their soul. It was a great conversion tool as well and did so magnificently. In teaching the alphabet our Puritan forebears knew the value of acrostics and the seventeenth century New England Primer provides a classic example. Obsessing on childhood depravity, our puritanical forefathers and mothers leaned into the polarities of salvation and sin. For example, to teach the letter "A", little children would delightfully memorize and respond, "In Adam's fall, man sinned all!" And to think, there are twenty-five more letters to go! Some were not so bad, though some were even more horrific! At any rate, you get my point! **Whether Catholic or Protestant we Christians have created and cultivated a cottage industry by using sin as a stick, often at the expense of the much larger**

**carrot, and the many wonderfully gracious carrots, that lovingly make our daily walk of belief and faith the greatest joy in God and God's indescribable, inexpressible, incomprehensible, and irresistible love that we now experience. The good life always demands that we gain some balance, some equilibrium, that we find ways to compartmentalize, that we put sin in perspective and in its subordinate, even inferior, place as a guilt inducing and overrated reactionary whipping post historically used to keep the fearful in line. Guilt is not born of God! Grace is! So, this morning we are going to talk about love! "What's love got to do with it?" once ask Tina Turner! Well, everything! Even so, that being said, we still have to wade through the mire today, forced to be reminded of the painful legacy that guilt minus grace, the permanent damage to the psyche that guilt lacking in grace has heaped upon us, leaving us devoid of hope, fulfilling in our minds a false promise of reaping what we sow as a promise of damnation, a bountiful harvest perfumed, hopelessly laden with dread, doom and gloom, fear and anxiety! And Jesus ain't much help today, not bailing us out in the least! In fact, he is part of the problem!**

**All four of our lections today remind us of the importance of boundaries as we live our lives, the need for rules and regulations, all the rubrics demanded that we might live our lives to the fullest, guideposts helping us to become the best human beings we can be, and yes, even to learn how to love fully. Yes, the irony of these essential, necessary, parameters is that they can indeed embolden and empower our lives if we do not allow these obligations to dominate us. And yes, it is an inexhaustive list that is exhausting! And yes, I am putting an unapologetic positive spin on all this biblical verbiage this morning! Our goal today is to make the gargantuan leap from law to love! The Deuteronomist warns the children of Israel to get their lives in order before they cross the Jordan and enter a promising land flowing with milk and honey. As they seized their presumed land of promise by conquest, an original version of manifest destiny, they were to clean up their act! The writer of Deuteronomy ominously declares, "Look here! Today I have set before you life and what is good versus death and what is wrong," what is bad! Do not mess up this good thing, this blessing, you are being given! It was a reminder that God and this people were in covenant relationship together and that their job one and following was to obey the commandments, the big ten and all those pesky picadilloes, the little annoying ones that got attached to their**

**wagons, each one a potential hook allowing for a personal or communal pitfall. It seems like every time we read the law in the Hebrew Bible, we are reading about a boatload of statutes all recalibrated and retrofitted as if God had actually once commanded them. The bottom line to this narrative, however, was to choose life, to choose life that you become blessed and not cursed, prosperous and not impoverished, and to assure that your descendants would thrive in their new digs. And a major component to finding this kind of personal and corporate success was to love the Lord your God. And as we read the biblical narrative, specifically and earlier the profoundly provocative Deuteronomic text in Deuteronomy 6:4, the epic Shema Israel, a narrative in which the writer boldly teaches readers then and now that loving God meant and means loving others, “others” being the operative word. Oh, if only we could cut to the chase and skip all the fine print, avoid or ignore all the red tape, every disclaimer, and simply be the loving people, the images of God, we were created to be. If only we were capable, had that unlimited and untainted capacity. If only loving were the only option available in our free will. And yet, we know that is not possible because we have the propensity, we are prone, perhaps even programmed to some degree to err. It is in our DNA! It helps keep us humble, an impossible job, as we stray from the positive straight and narrow that opens life’s doors and windows, creating and cultivating unlimited potential and possibility as we travel life’s adventuresome journey.**

**And we are not nearly done with sin just yet! We are just getting started, just getting warm! The so-called Sermon on the Mount takes a tumultuously negative and ominous turn today with some striking, strident, most stringent, words of warning attributed to the man of grace, mercy, peace, and yes, of course, love, Jesus of Nazareth. His commentary on the law is an indictment against literalism and against any righteous arrogance of thought and mind when it comes to the proverbial letter of the law. Jesus reminds us that no matter how good we think we are, how just and lovingly gracious and merciful we perceive ourselves to be, that when we are at our worst, we indeed seem most unworthy. After all we are all flawed, failure a part of our struggle to be fully alive, fully human. It is a reminder that we indeed are desperately dependent on God’s loving grace to sustain us and to enhance, to embolden and empower, our lives. This is a very humbling narrative, Jesus reminding us that sin is a matter of the heart and mind**

and not just an outward expression, a negative action carried out or a bad behavior fulfilled in the heat, or in the premeditated sobriety, of a given moment. This is the infamous narrative in which Jesus begins with the haunting, the loaded, verbiage that surely sent a chill, “You have heard it said!” Uh oh! This can’t be good! Surely his or whoever’s audience knew what was coming next, just waiting for the other shoe to drop! It is not enough that we not become murderers, that we break that commandment, child’s play, but if we have anger we are just as guilty! According to Jesus it is as if we have already committed the crime! Oh my! Jesus is purported to say that when we call someone “you idiot” we are condemned; to call someone “you fool” we are sentenced to the fiery flames of hellfire and brimstone. We have all done it! We are all guilty! I uttered those phrases as recently as this past Tuesday night as I stared at the television screen during the president’s State of the Union address! I said as much about a certain prosperity television evangelist during my Wednesday night Bible Study! Might as well come clean and tell it all! Might as well be honest! Good for the soul! Jesus tells his gathered mountainside congregation to never bring a gift to the Altar if you have an ongoing dispute, any concern or issue with any brother or sister. Really! Seriously! Churches would go broke, couldn’t, wouldn’t pay the bills! Jesus not only condemns adultery, which back in the day was usually an accusation sadly reserved for women, but Jesus fixes that one, declaring that a man, yes, any man, who lusts in his heart is guilty of committing, of perpetrating this egregious sin. None of us will ever forget the peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia who would be president, Jimmy Carter, James Earl, the candidate admitting in an interview with Playboy magazine back in the day—no, I did not read it—that he was guilty, guilty, guilty as charged. Now there is some nice imagery for our Valentine’s Day festivities. Good luck with that! Jesus tells his listening audience that if an eye causes us to sin, pluck that baby out now before it is too late or before it is tempted to offend once again. And then, better to lose a member, any member, ponder that idea for a moment, that causes us to stumble rather than our whole body being cast into hell! Yikes! We would give the prosthetics industry more business than it could handle! After all, you can only amputate so much before there is nothing left! Think about it, if the sin is in our thoughts and mind, we would have to behead ourselves! Oops! And to all the men back in the day who found it way too easy to divorce a woman over anything that did not suit his fancy, Jesus says, unless it is unfaithfulness, it is out

of bounds, absolutely not permissible! Jesus is then reported to have said in this sermonic venting, the rabbi clearly on a roll now, “And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery!” Would any of us today take that seriously, even if Jesus really did say it! I think not! Once again, yikes, double yikes! Jesus ends by telling the crowd to never pledge, to never swear an oath! Ironically, Jesus’ lofty expectations, the high bar of his interpretive commentary on the commandments specifically intended for his constituents, all subtly reflected throughout the Gospels, outweigh in severity the ancient letter of the law as it was traditionally understood and enforced, devolving into the contemporary fodder for the gristmill in the lives of the rabbi’s constituents who dared to have the audacity to choose to take up their cross and follow. Frankly, the only part of this preaching extravaganza with which I can resonate comes at the conclusion of today’s lection, “Let your *yes* mean *yes*, and your *no* mean *no*!” Finally, something that seems more than remotely reasonable, something that makes sense.

Folks, if Jesus said these words, and most scholars do not believe that he did, but assuming for our purposes he did, perhaps he was taken way out of context, these thoughts the height of hyperbole, embellished, exaggerated, extrapolated beyond reasonable degree and doubt. If these were serious sentiments then we are in a pickle, up the proverbial creek without a paddle, surely in a sticky wicket to be sure! My take is that Jesus was attempting to point out the hypocrisy perpetrated and perpetuated by those in authority who sought to enforce every trivial detail, every minute jot and tittle attached to the law that had made it unrealistically cumbersome and unreasonably weighty with layer upon layer of oppressive rules and regulations. Minutiae on steroids! In this text I see someone who was both seriously literal and who was doing some serious tongue-in-cheek, a satirical stand-up routine, making a mockery, a juggernaut of incredulity and impossibility of keeping the law as it had come to be interpreted and punitively enforced. **My takeaway is that maybe Jesus was overreaching a bit—preachers will take liberties, embellish or exaggerate a story you know—in trying to illustrate a huge, colossal, ginormous, monumental, point, to teach these new and potential followers including skeptics, cynics, and scoffers alike, that to live a life of belief and faith, that to be fully Jewish, was not dependent on the law, to refrain from myopically emphasizing the printed words on a page. Maybe Jesus was just**

having a bad hair day! Maybe one or more of the disciples had set him off, put him in a bad mood! After all, faithfulness was and would always be dependent on grace, grace upon grace, and grace only comes from, grace only abounds, as a result of God's love, love upon love. When we are loving all these harshly judgmental and retributive threats are washed away, they fade away like dust in the wind, in the twinkling of God's eye, as do all our sins, our iniquities, all our egregious and even subtle errors that haunt us and diminish our humanity, limiting our emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. Jesus preaches a standard in this section of the Sermon on the Mount that he already knows to be outrageous, preposterous, impossible to mind for any who choose a cross and become one of his followers, as people who are passionate God-lovers, zealously longing to be even remotely, the slightest bit, faithfully obedient, a servant full of honesty, sincerity, and integrity, our being and doing always in concert. Maybe much of this was and is a ruse, yes, designed to startle our complacency, to get our undivided attention, causing us the severe whiplash of a sudden double take, taking these poignant words under a most cerebral advisement! It's just a thought! Otherwise, we are you know what out of luck!

Jesus' admonitions today are a thick maze, thickest weeds, to use a golf image, the rough of unnavigable and rugged terrain, making the most difficult corn maze look like a walk in the park! We wade through the mess and muck of life in our daily walk! We need a four wheel, all wheel, drive theology to navigate and negotiate these deep ruts, steep cliffs, and precarious overhangs. So, what do we do? Well, let's make it simple, easy on ourselves. If we can become, embrace being the loving people we were created to be and are called to be by the Christ, then all these sermonic words attributed to Jesus become almost meaningless, unnecessary, irrelevant to our everyday living. They become superfluously extracurricular, speculative conversation, interesting but hypothetical debate and dialogue because our life and living has already been settled because of God's gracious love instilled before our births, meaning that we can be at peace. It is part of being the very image of the Divine! And of course, it is true that at the foot of the cross all things, everything, everyone, has been made bare, exposed, and made level, forgiveness assured and a loving path forward revealed and smoothly groomed like a firmly packed snowmobile trail. If we can be loving! If we can capture but a glimpse, live but a microcosm of God's love in

**the world, then all this excessive verbosity of biblical proportions becomes obsolete, no longer needed or even relevant, every nuance, every trivial pursuit rendered irrelevant, wiped out in an instant, obliterated in a nanosecond in time! The rest will take care of itself! In God's realm it always does! Loving! Now that is not so difficult, is it? That is the only commandment, the only thing required! So easy, yet so hard! The solution is so simple but yet so complex, so complicated! Be loving! Always and everywhere, be loving! The rest will take care of itself! "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and your neighbor as yourself! As Jesus once said to harried and hurried, distracted, Martha, "Martha, you are busy about many things. Only one thing is needed!" And yes, it was the better thing! There is only one rule and one rule only! Be loving! How hard can it be?**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and only asks that we love God, love our neighbors, loving one another, and love self! Amen and amen.**