

# Matthew 5:21-37

## Concerning Anger

<sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, <sup>[a]</sup> you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult <sup>[b]</sup> a brother or sister, <sup>[c]</sup> you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell <sup>[d]</sup> of fire. <sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister <sup>[e]</sup> has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, <sup>[f]</sup> and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court <sup>[g]</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

## Concerning Adultery

<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If 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. <sup>[h]</sup> <sup>30</sup> And 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. <sup>[i]</sup>

## Concerning Divorce

<sup>31</sup> “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup> But 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.

## Concerning Oaths

<sup>33</sup> “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.’ <sup>34</sup> But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one. <sup>[j]</sup>

## Deuteronomy 30:15-20

<sup>15</sup> See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God<sup>[a]</sup> that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

**February 12, 2017**

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5: 21-37**

**Choose Life: The Ethics of Jesus**

**Kerra Becker English**

Today you get to hear three sermons. How about that? The first sermon excerpt is from Moses, who is preaching to Israel, after they have been delivered from slavery in Egypt, after they have wandered for forty years through the wilderness, and after they have ignored just about every commandment God had given them. These are Moses' final words, his ultimate plea for this stiff-necked and difficult people to get right with God before he succumbs to death at the age of 120. In this message, he is also preparing them for battle, readying them to enter the Promised Land, and fight for their right to be there. It is a rousing text to be sure. Moses makes full claim of his authority to lead the people and speak tenderly about God's faithful love for them, even when they've blown it completely.

We also read from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his excerpt about getting our ethics right. It is Jesus harkening back to the themes of Torah, Moses' message that obedience to God makes a clear difference in who we will choose to be, and whom we will choose to serve. In preparing for this week's message of my own, I talked to my friend Patrick, the Rabbi at Bonay Kodesh, about these two texts, and I learned something that I likely wouldn't have discovered on my own. Jesus is also claiming authority in an uncommon way. There is a tradition in Judaism called b'shem omro which means to speak in the name of someone else. In Judaism, you have to cite a source in order to have an opinion that's worthy of argument. Rather than do that, Jesus says, "You have heard it taught this way... but I say something else." He doesn't quote the Rabbi who taught him, or a lesson from one of the prophets, or even make a case for reiterating Moses' best points. We learned from last week's text that he's already been trolling the scribes and Pharisees with his teaching, so this expression alone would have come as a shock to his listeners. Claiming that he had "right" interpretation and the authority to interpret the teachings of the law on his own was unheard of, a slippery slope from there to the charge of blasphemy of claiming to BE

God. It's an example of Jesus not caring what others thought of his medium because his message was so radically on point. It's "Punk Rock" Jesus – as my friend the Punk Rock Rabbi called it.

So here we are, in our own time, with our own questions about who gets to claim true authority as a communicator of God's message. It's been awhile since we've gotten carved tablets sent from heaven. Who now has the authority to preach and teach about what's right and what's wrong? Who has the authority to stand at the dawning of a new age and say to the people, by God you better "Choose life so that you and your descendants might live?" Who has the authority to call out our murderous anger, our cheating hearts, our broken promises, and our false testimony? Who will hold us accountable to walking in God's ways and observing God's commandments? Who will stand in line with Moses, with Jesus, and alongside the honest truth of scripture that calls out our human vulnerabilities to fear and pride with amazing precision?

Well, being that I'm the one standing up here at this lectern here in this moment, I'm starting to get a little bit worried. Is that someone with authority supposed to be me? I did mention that there would be three sermons after all, not just these two, which means, I guess, that it's my turn.

So let's suppose I were to make a case for owning that authority to speak on God's behalf. I've graduated from seminary. Check. I've jumped through Presbyterian hoops, multiple times, for candidacy, ordination, and then re-approval every time I've moved. Check. I've studied this week's texts. Check. I've hopefully grown in my ability to write coherent sermons over the years. Check. I know how to cite reliable sources of knowledge to make my argument stronger. Check. But all those things are superficial to what's really at stake here. How do I know, really know, that it's God's voice coming through, and not my own, and not my professor's, and not the Committee on Ministry's, and not some cultural acquiescence to what will collectively make our lives more comfortable?

That calling to speak on God's behalf each week is the very thing that is supposed to make a preacher at least a little bit afraid and a whole lot of humble every time she or he gets behind a pulpit. It is

what we do, and then again, it's not exactly what we do. Because it's messy. If every pastor in every pulpit in every church in the United States of America alone is actually speaking God's Word, then God must be at least a little bit schizophrenic. Am I right? Consistency across the board is not something Christians are particularly known for. Our denominational separations and doctrinal acts of aggression toward one another make it confusing to determine if there's any authority in the Christian church whatsoever. I've heard it said at Richmond Hill that at least Roman Catholics have the authority of the Pope, and evangelicals have some uniting authority that has its headquarters in Texas, but mainline Protestants have absolutely no idea where their authority comes from. I long to know that I am following the authority of the Holy Spirit moving in me, but sometimes it's harder to tell that for sure than I'd care to admit.

Personally, the thought of assuming such authority is scary. I know from those times when my message doesn't seem completely put together, or when I say something that comes out wrong, or when someone misinterprets or correctly interprets something in an awkward or unloving way, then I KNOW that I'm no Moses, and I'm certainly no Jesus here. My authority is limited at best and is determined not by any credentials on my wall or experience over the years, but whatever little authority for preaching and teaching I have must come from God alone, or else it should be disregarded completely. I've heard more than one good preacher pray before they begin to preach that those listening will remember what comes from God and hopefully forget everything else. Now that's a good prayer.

So I return to this ethic found in Jesus' preaching, the one that echoes with the weight of Moses' teaching that comes from the law, and I pray that these two original sermons are the ones that will be lifted up today, and that will take hold of your own consciousness. Moses and Jesus preach with authority, with the full weight of God's power and promise carrying them. They preach about life and about courage. They preach with absolute conviction, knowing right from wrong. They are convinced that a life lived under God's ordinances is the only life worth living. And as Jesus so aptly points out, you can live under the letter of the law without having any spirit in it. You can refrain from murder, but be killing

your brother or sister with anger. You can refrain from having an affair, but be consumed by lust. You can legally marry and divorce, but not treat your partner with the love and respect promised in the covenant of marriage. You can swear up and down by God or on your mother's grave that something is true, but that doesn't make it true or right or good.

There's an art to following God's law and Jesus would be the first one to say that it isn't about scraping by with the bare minimum. The Ten Commandments were the minimum requirements, remember? They were the basis of creating a community where people could live together without killing each other, stealing each other's stuff, or ruining relationships over lust or jealousy. Actually and actively growing into that place where we LOVE our neighbor is the harder commandment to follow. Choosing life when one has been delivered from slavery and wandered through the wilderness for 40 years isn't as easy as it first might seem. People grumbled to Moses – why didn't you just leave us where we were? It's too hard. LIFE is too hard. And Jesus is reminding us here just how hard it is to keep choosing LIFE. The Promised Land, or Eternal Life, the big rewards guaranteed for those who follow God's law and keep God's commandments sometimes still seem like they're the impossible possibilities, that only by God's grace and mercy alone can we get there. And that's correct. It takes the steadfast loving-kindness of our God to keep us at all following this ethic rather than going with the way of the world. You don't have to look too hard to see that the world is getting along just fine with murderous anger, cheating hearts, broken promises, and false testimony. When the ones who call themselves Christian, who now hold tremendous political power in the Western world are not calling it out, but are flaunting such blatant disregard for God's ways, someone, SOMEONE will have to preach like Moses, and SOMEONE will have to teach like Jesus. Someone must tell the hard truth when national and religious leaders proclaim their faith in name only, not in practice. But then again, now, maybe it's not someone, it's all of us, reminding each other of who we really want to be. Choose life. You know what you've heard said – what would Jesus say? Amen.