

Sermon: **JUSTICE IS: LOVE**
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Saint Matthew's UMC
February 12, 2017

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"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a member of your community, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult someone, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your companion has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to them, and then come and offer your gift. ...

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that if you look at another with lust you have already committed adultery with them in your heart. 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. 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.

—from Matthew 5.38-48

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Well, that's one of those things that doesn't sound like good news right away, does it? Jesus starts out sounding like he's going to change the law. "You've heard it said but I say..." but then as he goes on you realize he's not changing the law— he's just making it harder, that's all: not only can you not murder somebody, you can't even *feel* like killing them. And if you do you're going to get thrown in hell.

That is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not talking about what the law *is*, he's getting at what it's *about*. The problem with following the law in itself is that it's inherently selfish. Say you're speeding down the road and you see a cop up ahead. You instinctively slow down to somewhere near the speed limit — because you've been twenty five miles over, right? And why do you slow down? Out of some concern for the pedestrians around you? Because you're thinking about other drivers and what they need? No, *you* don't want to get a ticket.

That's what following the law is always like. I don't want to get in trouble. But what Jesus is getting at is something much deeper. I preach that God will not reward good behavior and will not punish bad behavior. God will only love us. And people have asked me, "Well then why be good?" Do you hear what's behind that? Why should I be good if I don't get something out of it? My answer is, you be good because it's good to be good. Because then you're good to people and that's good for them and good for you.

Remember for Jesus in all those laws and commandments and procedures there's just one rule. There's one law. (You know it by now. We've been talking about this.) *God loves you and wants you to love.* So it might sound like Jesus is sort of criticizing following the laws, but the problem is you can follow the law, you can avoid killing somebody, and be *legal* but not be *loving*. You can still say mean things about them. You can still speak ill of them behind their back or even insult them to their face. That's legal but it's not loving.

Jesus says, not just "don't kill people" but "actually love them." It's good we have laws against adultery so that that stuff doesn't happen but that's not enough. If you make a person the object of your desire you've already committed adultery whether you act it out or not, because you're not loving them.

What Jesus wants us to do is not just follow the rules and be legal, he wants us to follow God and be loving.

So the apostle Paul hears about some stuff that's going on in the church in Corinth. They're having all sorts of fights and they're dividing up into these little groups. He reminds them that it's Christ's love, not their desires or opinions, that holds us all together. He says all of those differences that we have don't matter, because we're not here to enforce our own preferences. We're here to love one another, to build up the body in love.

And so Paul goes on to talk about all the different gifts that we've been given to build up the body in love. He talks about all the different gifts that we have, all in the service of one spirit. Because there's one gift that we all have and that's love. So he goes on to chapter thirteen, that great chapter about love: "If I have all the faith in the world, faith so as to move mountains and don't have love I am nothing. If we have a church that has all the right beliefs and we follow all the right procedures and we talk about every issue and we vote on it in the council and everybody knows about it and everybody agrees and we follow that and we don't have love, we're a messed up church.

"If we have worship service in which we sing all the best songs and the pastor preaches an incredible sermon—and the whole service is less than an hour long—and it doesn't help us love more deeply, we just wasted that whole hour. We should have been out playing golf, even in the snow, if we don't have love.

What Jesus wants us to do is to stop asking what's in it for me and to ask, how can I love you? How can I serve you? Imagine if we had a church like that. Over the last few months we've been talking a lot about our vision for the church and what's important to us and what kind of church God is calling us to be. We've talked a lot about "what I like about the church and what I don't like" and what's working and what's not working. Most of the questions have been framed in that way. What do you like? What don't you like?

Now Jesus is asking us to set that question aside and ask a new question: How can we love each other? What do I have to offer to love and bless my neighbors? When we ask that question it puts our differences in a whole different place.

Back in the 1980s, Beth and I were both appointed to this little church in Bigfork Montana. every Tuesday morning I would go up with Patty Brown up the hill to the Lake View Care Center, a nursing home up the top of the hill. And I would do a bible study and Patty Brown would play the piano and we'd have a hymn sing. They had these song books at this nursing home, these really old ratty song books with all these terrible songs. They were awful. The words were sappy, the music was schmaltzy and the theology was just rotten.

A lot of the theology was that old Baptist stuff that says "you've got to be washed in the blood of the lamb or else you're going to hell." I hated it. "God leads his dear children along" sounds good right? But it goes: "Some through the waters, some through the flood, some through the fire but all through the blood..." I hated that song. I really did not want these people to be singing it, but those were the songs that were in the book, so we sang them week after week.

Week after week I got to know those people and I got to love them. I got to hear their stories. These were people who were born around the turn of the last century so they had seen World War I. They had lived through the influenza epidemic. They'd lived through World War II. They had homesteaded out in the frontier in Montana in the 20s and 30s in houses that sometimes were little log cabins without plumbing or electricity. One of them even lived in a sod house. They'd lived through the depression. They'd seen all of that history, World War II, the Korean War, the civil rights movement, Ronald Reagan, the whole thing.

And here they were still singing. They had seen so much— and they had lost so much. They'd lost their homes and their neighborhoods and their friends. They had all lost spouses. None had a living spouse remaining. They had lost memories, and some of them had lost their memory. They had lost their physical capacities. There they were in their wheelchairs and their walkers, week after week having survived all of that. I gradually realized they *had* been brought—some through the waters and some through the flood, some through the fire but all through the blood: they've been brought by the love of Jesus, poured out for them at great cost

and suffering. And here they were. I realized, *that's their song*— I love that song! I loved singing all those songs with them. Not because I liked the songs, but because I loved the people.

Imagine a church in which we're here for one purpose and that's to love each other and to practice loving and to be really good at it, so that we can take that out into the world. We'll have lots of differences. There will be some of us who like these kinds of songs and some of us who like those kinds of songs and because we're here to love each other we will gladly sing the songs that we hate because it's somebody's favorite. It's somebody's story, and we love those *people*. And when we love the people we don't care about the song.

Imagine a church in which we really deeply love one another, and that's all we're here to do. Sure, we have priorities and preferences and programs and ideas of what we think ought to happen, but what we're really here to do is not to ask "What do I like," but rather, "How can I love you? What are the gifts that I have with which I can bless you?"

When we do that we discover that loving people who are different from us shows us the gifts that we've been given. When we love people who are different from us we discover our own gifts. We discover ourselves in those who are different. That's how it is that you love yourself as your neighbor.

Imagine living as a church or as a world in which our goal is not just to keep from killing each other but to actually love each other.

In Deuteronomy God says "I'm setting before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life." We usually interpret that to mean to follow God's rules so that God will let you live in this land. But Jesus shows us that what God is asking us to do is also to choose what is life giving *for others*, even at great cost to ourselves. That's how we really live in the world God gives us. Jesus shows us love that's there for other people even at one's own cost. "Greater love has no one than this," Jesus says, "To lay down your life for your friends, to sacrifice for somebody else's sake."

When we talk about establishing justice we think of laws and policies, but God won't let us off the hook: justice is really about love, about social systems in which we express actual love for others, especially those who are different from us. Justice really means loving our neighbors as ourselves; and when we meet ourselves in our neighbors, we discover that justice is unity. When we do that we do more than just avoid killing each other. We discover our oneness, our unity and we experience what we really can only call heaven.