

EPIPHANY SIX, YEAR A, FEBRUARY 12, 2023

In Mark Twain's great story of Huckleberry Finn, Huck says, "What's the use of learning to do right when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong." Huck sure had a way of putting his finger on the heart of a problem. We know we should do what is right but it is so "troublesome". That is probably almost always true to some extent.

Most of us would say that morality is a matter of clear choices or at least it appears so on the surface. Right and wrong, we would like to believe, are separate and tangible realities so ethical action is a simple matter of obeying laws and commandments. However, our everyday moral decisions are rarely such straightforward matters. No amount of laws and commandments can ever cover all the decisions we face daily.

Now in Jesus' day the law was very clear. It said that people should not murder, lust after each other, commit adultery or swear which is pretty straight forward, specific commandments. If you notice, the commandments, except for two, are all about what you shouldn't do. But, Jesus basically said that's not enough and called us to a higher standard.

The gospel we read this morning is a portion of the Sermon on the Mount which speaks to the difficulties of living in community. Earlier in the text, Jesus reminds us that he has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He basically puts a new spin on traditional Jewish law. We could almost say that Jesus kicks it up a notch. He is elevating our human behavior from the literal "Thou shalt not's" to a more complex set of spiritual disciplines and ethics which has, at its core, the "Thou shall Do" or more specifically an ethic of love.

In this teaching, our inward temperament is perhaps more important. That is the higher ethic and greater standard. Jesus attempts to move us beyond the "thou shalt not do something" to how we live in relationship and how our treatment of one another should be based ultimately upon our love for one another, rather than our desire to keep the law. Laws are important but they don't change hearts and if our hearts aren't changed the laws are meaningless.

Our relationships with each other are crucial elements to our spiritual life. We cannot seek to know and understand God apart from our actions within community. An ethics professor once commented that ethics is how we behave when we decide we belong together. The ethic put forth in today's reading is an ethic based primarily on love and reconciliation in human community. Reconciliation, the healing of what is broken, is far more important to Jesus than any offering or sacrifice.

The first law that Jesus talks about he says "the law says do not murder but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." It seems unreasonable that Jesus would come down so hard with a blanket condemnation of anger, especially considering that it seems to be a natural human emotion? Certainly Jesus got angry. His overturning the money tables in the temple is a good example of his expression of anger.

Anger is a natural emotion and it is healthy and good to get our anger out because we know if we keep things inside we can eventually explode. The Greeks called anger "a short madness," and we literally and even linguistically agree: we get angry, we get "mad." Police say that more than half of the people murdered in our nation are killed by someone

who was either their relative or their friend out of anger! Clarence Darrow, probably the most famous criminal lawyer of his generation, once said, "Everyone is a potential murderer. I have not killed anyone, but I frequently get satisfaction out of obituary notices." I think we all can admit to feeling that way. But more importantly we have all exhibited that kind of anger at one point or another in our lives where we are so livid with someone we want to kill that person or wish them dead. But obviously, we don't act on it. And let's face it, the anger most of us feel on a regular basis doesn't lead to murder.

Most of the time our anger comes from something that someone has said to us or a disagreement we've had that others don't get upset about. What that tells us is that anger is a subjective emotion and that getting angry has more to do with the person whose angry than with the circumstances that set them off. This is what leads to broken relationships. This is the kind of anger that consumes and this is why Jesus is so harsh about anger.

Instead of fussing and fighting and fuming and letting our anger get the best of us and consume us, Jesus wants us to look within and explore those blind spots and hot buttons that are so easily triggered because ultimately anger not only destroys relationships but us as well.

When you think about it, most things aren't worth fighting over. For example, have you ever gotten into an argument with your husband or wife or best friend or sibling and, a few days later, you couldn't remember what the argument was about?

I know in my own family there is a story about my grandmother and her sister who didn't speak for years. The family would never invite both of them to the same event not wanting to cause more distress. Finally, one family member said enough is enough and invited them both to the same event. The two sisters eyed each other across the room and finally decided to speak to each other and, of course, after conversing with each other for awhile neither could remember why they were angry with each other. All those years wasted being angry. For what?

There is no question that people can be frustrating, irritating, exasperating, and even infuriating. No matter. We are in this together. When the Bible defines God as "love," and defines us as created in God's image, the Bible is tipping us off to something extremely important. "Love" means "relationships." God made us for relationships - mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, neighbors, friends, and especially those with whom we are close in the family of God - and the care and nurture of those relationships is part and parcel of our Christian discipleship.

Jesus was pressing for a new ethic, a new relationship within humanity and between humanity and God. God wants us to treat each other well. God cares a lot about our dignity. God doesn't want us to settle for bare minimums in the communities we create; God wants us to relate in ways that reflect the fullness of divine love, mercy, grace, and generosity. God loves us, with plenty of mercy, patience, and endless concern for what is best for the other. And yes, the way of love is hard. It's costly. It hurts. But let's not fool ourselves; there is a place called hell. It's the place we create for each other every time we choose an easy and austere legalism over an arduous and radical love.

Remember, how you live with each other matters. What you say and do, what you focus on, what you prioritize on these things matter! Your choices have life-and-death consequences, so take your communal lives seriously. Don't make it harder for yourselves and reconcile with each other. Honor each other. Speak truthfully to each

other. Protect each other. Do these things — not to earn God's blessings, but because you are already so richly blessed.

Our Old Testament lesson reminds us that we have a choice. To choose life is to choose to live in covenant with God; learning to love God. And grasping God's love for us involves working with intention in community. So see Christ in the people around you. Share God's love with someone who's forgotten it. Pray asking God to change you in ways you haven't imagined. Open your heart to the Spirit. Search for something deeper and better than your own comfort. Because when we live our lives in the light of God's love in the end, that is what choosing life is really all about. Amen.