

2020 02 16 – Holy Manners

Matthew 5:21-37

That's a pretty brutal scripture passage, isn't it? It's hard to imagine Jesus even saying some of these words: talking about the fires of Gehenna (hell), plucking out your right eye, or cutting off your hand. What on earth was he trying to say!? I have to admit that I've never preached on this passage before. In the past, when it appeared in the lectionary, I carefully managed to avoid it. But this time, as I read Jesus' words, I saw something different. This time, as I spoke the scripture out loud, I heard a message that goes beyond the harsh judgement and the gore.

So I'm asking you trust me, work with me, as we walk through this scripture passage together. First of all, let's put in context. These words are part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We have been studying this sermon for the last two weeks. Last Sunday, our scripture reading ended with Jesus' saying: "I tell you, unless your sense of justice surpasses that of the religious scholars and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." It's important to note that, in the gospel of Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is a term used for the reign of God on earth, God's reign of peace and justice for all. So Jesus is saying that in order to live as God would have us live we need a sense of justice that goes beyond Jewish laws, civil laws, any laws. Then Jesus goes on to give several illustrations of this concept

Jesus begins with murder. He says, “You’ve heard that our ancestors were told, ‘No killing’ and ‘Every murderer will be subject to judgement.’ But I tell you that everyone who is angry with sister or brother is subject to judgement.” Let’s be clear, Jesus is not saying it’s wrong to get angry. There are lots of good reasons for anger. The issue is how we deal with that anger. In some cases, we can use it to pursue justice-seeking actions. Other times, we need to work through our anger, to be able to let it go and to reconcile with our family and our neighbour.

Jesus is really clear that it is more important to reconcile with family, friend, or neighbour than it is even to worship. The God of Love is more interested in reconciliation and peace than in hearing our songs of praise, prayers of intercession or even the dedication of our offering on Sunday morning. That’s one of the reasons that we “Pass the Peace” at the beginning of our worship service every Sunday. And that’s why I invite you to “welcome the stranger and to be reconciled with your neighbour.” Passing the peace can be an act of confession and forgiveness. It can be an act of reconciliation.

Jesus goes on to explain that true reconciliation happens outside of courtrooms. When you have a disagreement with someone it is always better to work it out before you get in front of a judge. It’s always better to work things out in person, to confess, to forgive, to compromise, before someone ... very possibly you ends up in jail or paying a fine that you can’t afford. Not killing, not slandering, not stealing, not cheating, is not enough; the reign of God is about reconciliation. It is about justice and peace.

OK... that was the easy part. For some reason, Jesus, or at least the author of this gospel, decided to use some of his most brutal illustrations when talking about adultery. First you need to understand that Jesus lived in a different time and a different place. He lived in a patriarchal society where the wife “belonged” to her husband. A man’s wife was considered his property. If a woman had an extramarital relationship then this was seen as a violation of the rights of her husband. Biblical scholars tell us that when Jesus talks about lust and says, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” He is talking to the men and he is using hyperbole to make his point. He is not being literal – Jesus is not a proponent of self-mutilation. What he is trying to do is point out that a woman is not a thing, an object for lust or a piece of property to be coveted. A woman is a person who deserves respect and care.

Similarly, when Jesus is talking about divorce, we have to remember the Jewish laws in those days did not allow a woman to divorce her husband. . But a man could divorce his wife for trivial reasons such as a blemish in her appearance, her inability to cook or her incessant talking. Once divorced, the woman had very few options: sometimes she became a beggar, sometimes a prostitute, sometimes several men would marry and divorce her in succession – she was basically passed around like a hot potato. When Jesus says, “Those who marry the divorced also commit adultery,” he is speaking out against this practice of treating women as property that can be moved about. (Fred Craddock et.al., *Preaching Through Christian Year – Year A*, page 115)

Jesus recognizes that the Jewish laws of his time do not go far enough. He knows that God's reign of peace and justice requires more. In the final part of today's reading he speaks out against the need for swearing oaths to God. He explains that the God of love expects honesty and integrity at all times, so oaths have no meaning. Jesus does not need hyperbole this time, he just says, "Say 'Yes' when you mean 'Yes' and 'No' when you mean 'No.'"

This is the end of the today's scripture passage, but it certainly isn't the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In fact, it is just the beginning. Jesus provides many more examples of what it means to be a part of God's kingdom on earth. But if we look at today's reading it's clear that each example is about relationship. Jesus talks about anger, disagreements, adultery, divorce and swearing oaths. And each time he emphasizes the need for reconciliation and justice. Each example illustrates the importance of treating our fellow human beings with love, integrity, respect, and care.

So what does that mean for us? Well the first thing that came to my mind as I read this passage was the term "Holy Manners." How many of you have heard that term before? Holy Manners are a part of the life of this congregation. In our Policy and Procedures manual we have a section that contains our Statement of Holy Manners. Here's the introduction to the section:

Our holy manners create an environment where we are freed and empowered:

- To take risks
- To think creatively
- To be fully ourselves

knowing that we are valued, loved and upheld in community.

Our policies also include the statement that each committee is supposed to begin their meetings by reminding themselves of this statement. I invite you to read it with me now.

We commit ourselves and will hold each other accountable to:

1. Keep God at the center of everything we do;
2. Respect the worth of each individual;
3. Affirm people's right to hold and express differing opinions, assume best intentions, listen carefully to each other, without interrupting;
4. Strive for equal opportunity and encouragement of participation of all;
5. Affirm the wisdom of silence, pausing from time to time to ponder what others have said and to discern the Spirit's movement;
6. Seek to understand what others are saying;
7. Be open to new ideas;
8. Respect the confidentiality of individual members and their stories;
9. Uphold and honor decisions that have been made;
10. Keep life in perspective by preserving a sense of humour; and
11. Hold one another in prayer.

I believe that these Holy Manners go beyond the laws of the church or the state.

These Holy Manners are a covenant that we make with God and with each other.

They are our attempt to begin the building of God's reign here at First United.

They are our promise to live as the Essence of Love would have us live. They are our way of showing that the Holy Spirit's unconditional and everlasting love grows here.