

2/16/2020

There is an old joke that has been told for generations. To some it's funny. To some it's not. I'll let you decide for yourself. Lena says to her husband, "Oleg, why don't you tell me you love me anymore?" And Oleg replies, "I told you fifty years ago that I loved you, and if that ever changes, I'll let you know."

Two days ago, we experienced once again the day of love that some Americans have gone overboard with while others rebel against it saying it's just a Hallmark holiday. I am personally somewhere in between. If it was the only time of the year I expressed my love for Dale, ours would be a relationship in serious trouble. Happily, I can say that we are a long way from that and express our love far more often than Oleg does to Lena.

Valentine's Day. The details are sketchy. Some say [St. Valentine](#) was a priest from Rome who lived in the third century AD. Emperor Claudius II had banned marriages, believing married men made bad soldiers and Father Valentine is thought to have arranged marriages in secret. He was imprisoned and sentenced to death for this crime. While in jail, Valentine apparently fell in love with the jailer's daughter. On February 14th, the day of his execution, he sent her a love letter signed 'from your Valentine' as a goodbye. And so it goes from there.

Valentine's Day. A day to express love, especially romantic love to one you love. It's a day when, sometimes, rings are given and engagements begin. It's a day, hopefully, for strengthening relationships. And that is ultimately what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel reading.

Jesus is referring back to the 10 Commandments in what He is saying in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. And what He does with them is takes them from just being about outer actions toward others to having to do with one's interior - the heart. Jesus deepens the purpose of God's commands regarding relationships in today's words and relationships are really what the 10 Commandments are all about.

We often view them as rules to follow. And at some level, they are. 8 of the 10 are stated in the negative. Here is what NOT to do in relation to others. Rules, guidelines, suggestions - however you choose to think about them, they focus primarily on relationships. 4 relating to God and 6 to fellow human beings.

1. Do not follow any gods other than the true God.
2. Do not make or worship idols.
3. Do not take God's name in vain.
4. Observe the Sabbath day by resting on the seventh day. (which is actually Saturday)
5. Honor your father and mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.

9. Do not lie, shorthand for do not bear false witness which is much broader than simply lying.
10. Do not covet what belongs to another.

Jesus highlights some of the worst of these on the mountainside as He is speaking that day. No murder, no adultery, no false witness. We certainly get murder. It's universal law. It ends relationships. Adultery is pretty clear as well. Betrayal. It hurts! It damages and sometimes destroys relationships. Jesus takes them to the next level by saying what we do internally with anger or lust is just as bad, so beware. But we may not get the whole thing about saying "you fool". There was more to it than what we may think now. Here are a couple of examples.

First, there is the deliberate insult. In the original language and in many translations of scripture it is left in the Aramaic: RACA. In Aramaic, raca is a term of derision roughly comparable to "worthless one" or "empty-head" or "contemptible one" or just plain garden-variety "idiot." The reason we find it so often not translated is that the meaning is expressed by tone of voice as anything. It is the kind of name-calling, the kind of insult, that is designed to cause someone else pain.

Why would Jesus come down so hard on something as seemingly trivial as name-calling? I can think of some names that could apply here in our recent news: Shiff, Nadler, Pelosi, McConnell. Romney, Trump. Why? Because name-calling is a source of pain and division between people, and such ought not to be. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." That's a lie. A **bold faced** lie. My version of that now that I'm no longer a kid is, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names may hurt my soul."

But there was more that came under the heat of Jesus' condemnation than simply mean-spirited insults. There was that insult that would do real damage to someone, the kind of insult that injures someone's good name. You might angrily call somebody an idiot and, painful as that might be to the person at that moment, it is unlikely that such a thing would follow them for the rest of their days. But if you called someone a thief or a liar or immoral and someone overheard, there is every likelihood that your charge would be repeated...not your anger, or your tone of voice, but your charge ... thus doing significant damage to the victim. As we hear now in our culture, it's not the reality of impropriety that matters anymore but just the perception of impropriety that can ruin a person. Guilty until proven innocent which is backwards from what we say we believe but not how we often practice it.

This is what Jesus was condemning when he warned against calling someone a fool. You see, for someone who heard Him on that hillside, calling a person a fool carried more weight than it might carry for us today. It meant more than simply that someone was acting foolishly; it had a moral tone about it. The Psalmist spoke of "the fool [who] has said in his heart `There is no God.'" It implies that the individual has some sinning to do and, in a moment of wishful thinking, says there will be no one to judge.

Thus, to call someone a fool was to brand that one as a loose living and immoral person. Jesus says don't do it, because the one who destroys another's good name like that, is liable to the severest judgment of all - hell fire.

Condemned for all eternity for some thoughtless words? Really? Does the punishment fit the crime? Listen to that wise New Testament scholar, William Barclay:

"All these gradations of punishment are not to be taken literally. What Jesus is saying here is this: In the old days men condemned murder; and truly murder is forever wrong. But I tell you that not only are a [person's] outward actions under judgment; the inmost thoughts are also under the scrutiny and the judgment of God. Long-lasting anger is bad; contemptuous speaking is worse, and the careless or the malicious talk which destroys [someone's] good name is worst of all."

So let us be careful about how we speak of others, how we even think of others lest we do damage to someone that can't be undone.

Jesus makes each of these "commandments" more difficult to "achieve". There is real judgement in His words and the need for obedience on our part. And He brings up touchy subjects. Divorce, adultery, murder. It sounds like we're condemned to hell if we fail at any point and that's more than a little scary.

So even with all of this talk of obedience and judgment, Jesus knows that we are saved by grace, not works. In chapter 20 of Matthew's gospel, He recounts the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Some of the workers toil away in the heat all day. Others work half a day. Some barely break a sweat in a short hour of work. At the end of the day, they all receive the same wage from the owner of the vineyard. That is grace. We do not earn a state of salvation God by our obedience. We enter into it by God's grace through God's gracious act in Jesus. Nevertheless, our obedience in thought, word and deed, as we confess in our liturgy, is important.

At bedtime, young Danny was praying at his mother's knee. "If I should die before I wake ... If I should die...."

"Go on Danny, go on," said his mother. "You know the rest of the prayer."

"Wait a minute," he said. Scrambling to his feet, he hurried downstairs. In a short time, he was back. Dropping to his knees once again, he took up the petition where he had left off.

After he finished, his mother questioned him about the episode and issued a loving rebuke. Danny explained: "Mom, I really thought about what I was saying, so I had to stop and put all of Ted's wooden soldiers on their feet. I had turned them on their heads just to see how mad he'd be in the morning. If I should die before I wake, I wouldn't want him to find them like that.

Lots of things seem fun if you are gonna keep on living, but you don't want them that way if you should die before you wake."

"You're right, dear," said his mother with a quiver in her voice. She thought of herself and many other grown-ups who should have stopped in the middle of their prayers to undo some wrong against another before proceeding. Danny, at his young age, gets it. Folks, it's all about relationships.

Jesus points this out in a startling way: there is a relationship between our getting along with each other and our getting along with God. Listen to what Jesus says: *"When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."* The message is that God is very, very, very concerned about human relationships, concerned enough to let us know that getting those relationships straight takes priority over participating in the Eucharist.

That's where the Peace comes from. It was that time in the early church's worship life, where before the celebration of Eucharist, people went and made right any brokenness in a relationship. It wasn't happy glad handing with coffee hour conversation. It was reconciliation. And if it wasn't right, you didn't come forward and receive.

Bet you didn't expect to be here when we started out with Valentine's Day did you? The 10 Commandments, the summary of the law in 2 commandments and Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount all boil down to love in relationship. It's more than just being civil by following the "rules." It's about being and remaining in relationship by living inside out. Little Danny gets it. I hope you will too. Amen