

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 5:21-37

Deut. 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

February 12, 2023

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Since it's Super Bowl Sunday, I thought it was a great day to talk about rules. If you are a football fan...you know the rules of the game. You know the difference between a 1<sup>st</sup> down and a 4<sup>th</sup> down. You know it's wrong to grab another player's facemask. It's good to tackle the quarter back but it's not so good to tackle the receiver before he's had a chance to catch the ball. And, you know which goal post to run towards (hopefully).

Rules are important. Because in football you want to win. Nobody wants to be the loser.

I've thought a lot about winning and losing this week. And the importance of rules. Rules are important when you play a game and when you want to win. But are rules always about winning?

A friend of mine once posed the question...do I want to connect or do I want to win? A football team wants to win and every game is a straight forward zero sum equation. That means in order to have a winner, someone must be the loser.

But, do we want to live our lives that way...in a zero sum reality of winners and losers? Or, would we rather build something different, something more rewarding? And, if that's the case...what do rules look like in a non-zero sum relationship?

Now, in game theory, a non-zero sum situation is when one person's win does not necessitate another person's loss. All parties can potentially gain and all parties could lose. A non-zero sum situation represents an opportunity to build cooperation, to connect, to work together. Where relationships are not a competition and where we aren't working in opposition to the well-being of others. This wouldn't be a popular theory in football but it's an important principle in life.

Looking at our Gospel reading, we are presented with a laundry list of rules. Things we should do and things we shouldn't do. But do these rules point us to a zero sum outcome or do they guide us towards a non-zero sum outcome? Put another way, is our Gospel reading advocating for winning or is it advocating for connection?

The rules given to us in Matthew are challenging and if we aren't careful, we can use them in zero sum ways...to point out winners and losers. How you ever heard scripture used that way? To divide the good from the bad, the worthy from the unworthy? The good Christians from the bad Christians? It's easy to do and we can quickly get on our high horse and stand at our pulpits and become the referees of one another.

But I want to suggest when we do that, we have missed the purpose of God's rules completely. Because God isn't about winners and losers. God gives us rules to help us work together for a common goal, a common love, a common commitment to building the kingdom of God for one another. God's rules are all about cooperation and connection, not about winning. In fact, they embody a non-zero sum reality in important ways.

For instance, when Jesus says you shall not murder, of course he is talking about the act of explicit murder but he is also talking about the ways in which we live that cause harm to others, when we ignore suffering, when we are complicit to oppression, when we refuse to help the hungry. Jesus' command is to reflect on our actions that cause greater harm, however that may look.

When Jesus directs us to reconcile with others and to repair the harm we may have done in a relationship, we directed to do that before coming to the altar for God's blessing. We take time to make things right.

And then, there is the command to not commit adultery. As one scholar noted, this text isn't solely about our individual romantic relationships, it is also about our desire to uphold those who we are not in relationship with. Meaning, we are to respect the dignity of each and every person and by upholding right living, we uphold the integrity of others.

When Jesus tells us to not swear, he is saying don't speak in a way that is deceitful. Simply tell the truth. Say no or yes, directly. Be forthright in your speech because anything less causes instability and distrust within our relationships.

Debie Thomas writes about this life-giving, non-zero sum process as the life that emerges in response to our God....

*"...who cares profoundly about human dignity. A God who takes our relationships with each other very seriously, and wants us to treat each other — not with a bare minimum of civility and morality — but with the deepest respect, integrity, and love.*

*Jesus is suggesting, a community in which the default assumption is that people tell each other the truth. People keep their promises. People don't deceive one another. In God's beloved community, no one uses language to connive or manipulate others. We remember that the words we say are spoken in the presence of God, and so we speak with care and respect for each other."*

Theologian Joy Moore describes it as the ability to be different than the culture around us so that the world notices God in us. We practice being a living example of righteousness, mercy, and humility. We practice taking care of one another, being honest, living with integrity, and working toward reconciliation.

Tonight, there will be one winner when the Super Bowl is over. But if we live into the Gospel, we will put aside the need to win and respond the way Jesus taught us – to value and protect, to live with authentic, dynamic and redemptive relationships – together in connection. Jesus gives us the rules not for a winner takes all outcome but for a thriving community made up of all of God's children.

Thanks be to God. Amen.