

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 5:21-37

Deut. 30:15-20

Psalms 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

February 16, 2020

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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When I was growing up, going to church was one of the best times of my week. It was in part because of the lessons my parents taught me. They were my early encouragers of faith taking me to church every Sunday, signing me up for Vacation Bible School every summer. They opened the door for me to know God and to be surrounded by people who set important examples of faith, love, and service. My faith was their faith.

But it wasn't until I was in high school that I found my own faith. I owe much of that (if not all of that) to my church, my incredible youth leaders and summer youth camps. During the summers at camp, kids from all over would pray together, sing together, and laugh together. We had a common bond of faith and a desire to know God more deeply. It was something different than the messages we got from the rest of the world, from school, or from other kids. It was safe.

It wasn't some fanatical indoctrination to a particular religious experience. It wasn't puritanical or judgmental. We talked openly about the challenges we felt as young people. Our leaders were honest about issues of sex and dating and drinking and drugs. They allowed us to open up about peer pressure, insecurities, and doubts. The warmth and welcome of my church made one thing possible...it allowed me to trust God. But it was always made very clear that trust in God, creating a life of meaning and purpose, meant committing to live differently. That commitment changed my life.

As we read through our texts this morning, there are two themes that stand out... trust in God and commitment to God's commandments.

But I was left wondering how does that actually happen? How do we move into a place where we fully put our lives in God's hands, our hearts and minds in God's path? How do we make faith our own? It isn't something anyone can force upon you. It isn't something you can simply read about. It isn't academic or theoretical. Trust in God, commitment to God is experiential.

It is a life changing trust and commitment in the God who loves you and cares for you, who lifts you up out of darkness and adversity, who says you are worth far more than you can ever imagine. A God who says I have a purpose for you that is better than anything you could ever have imagined on your own.

Now...imagine having that light bulb go off for you as a young person trying to navigate a complicated and confusing world. Or, as someone who is caught in the depths of depression. Or, someone who feels they have lost everything and who can't figure out how to take a step forward in life. Imagine the life changing course correction of putting it all in God's hands. Because, the world won't take care of you that way. But God will. Could you trust that?

The point of our texts is that saying yes to God's love is the first step. That's trust. It's critical because it can save us like nothing else in this world. Saying yes to God is just the first step, and taking that step is essential. But, partnering with God is critical. We can't simply say yes to God and then go back to our old ways. Our Gospel is clear...this isn't a passive process.

In other words, the follow through, the practice, the on-going commitment to God is what enlivens and solidifies our experience of God in our lives. We turn things over to something greater than our own desires and expectations and then we say, God, now I'm ready to do the work. I'm ready to choose life in you. And so begins step two...Commitment.

That's where our texts today are really handy. They give us some step by step instructions to what this practice of trust and commitment looks like and why it matters.

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.

Take a look at Matthew.

This can be a daunting text on the surface. But when we look closer we see a couple of important directives. Jesus, in this part of the Sermon on the Mount, is calling us to an ever deeper and more committed relationship with God. That means, a commitment to following God's commandments of right living and dedicated practice. Jesus is telling us how to put our trust into action. And I want you to listen to how our actions are far reaching beyond our own individual lives.

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. Imagine how that could change the world around us.

When Jesus directs us to reconcile with others and to repair the harm we may have done in a relationship, and we are 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 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.

That's a lot to take in. But, at the heart of each of these directives is a deeper desire for all of us to be in community with one another and with God. These are not laws as much as they are commitments to living in wholeness and kindness and compassion with ourselves, with one another, and with God. And so when we decide to trust God, we decide that God's directives are worth trusting as well.

The result? When we commit ourselves to trusting God's direction in our lives, we are ready and eager to practice living those directives in our words, in our actions, and in our desires. Because we believe they are life-giving.

Debie Thomas writes about this life-giving process is that,

*"...the version that emerges is of a 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."*

Does it take trust? Yes, it does. Does it take work? Absolutely. Will it be difficult? At times.

These things don't come easily but that's the beauty of practice. We come back again and again. We come back to God's commandments, to God's way of living and we claim it as our own. And I will promise you this...it changes everything.

Thanks be to God. Amen.