

Wesley United Methodist Church
February 12, 2017
Who Are You?
Title: Create Right Relationships
Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:21-26, 33-37

Since Christmas, we have been focusing on the question, “Who are You?” We were reminded to follow the star and to see the paths that God is lighting for us. We remembered and hopefully, reconnected with the fact that we are beloved children of God and that God knows our name. We continued with the idea that God has called us to a special purpose and recognized that discipleship comes in many, and sometimes unlikely, forms. A couple of weeks ago we began a journey through the Sermon on the Mount to understand better what Jesus taught us to be and do as disciples. The Beatitudes invited us to live by embodying a love for justice and kindness in our everyday lives. Last week, we focused on living with integrity.

It is my hope and my prayer that during these weeks, there has been something that has connected with the way that God is speaking to each of us and that perhaps, you have examined a little more closely God’s call in your life. For pastors, one of the dangers and blessings in preaching is that we spend hours with the topic before the 15 minutes or so of speaking on Sunday. That means that God has been speaking to me and causing me to wrestle with some of the questions I have been asking.

Today, we continue with Jesus’ sermon as Matthew shares it and we focus on creating right relationships. Next week, we look at going beyond what we are required to do and going the extra mile in love.

Today's scriptures focus on making choices – making the basic right choice and then making all those little daily choices that help the bigger choice come to fruition.

Near the end of the Book of Deuteronomy we read the admonishment for us to make the choice between life and death. The Hebrew people had been in the desert for 40 years and now as they prepare to cross over the Jordan River and enter the promised land, they are presented with the imperative to choose between life and death.

It should be easy to make that decision – who wouldn't choose life over death – but it's more complicated than that. It's not a matter of a onetime decision; it is a matter of choosing a way of life – a decision that you need to keep making day after day.

Throughout our life, we are always called to make decisions that have consequences although we don't always see the consequences right away. Little decisions build upon each other and then we start to see the results or consequences. There are obvious ones like what we choose to eat and the impact that this has on our lives and our health over time. It is these every day decisions that we can sometimes get sloppy about.

The Hebrew people are being told that they are about to enter a land where people will have a different way of living. They will worship different gods and have different ways of doing things. After 40 years of being led by God through the wilderness, the question for them now is, "who will they follow." God is asking them, "Who are you? Who will you be? Whose will you be?"

When you enter the land where life is easier and temptations abound, who will you follow? Whose will you be? The choice is between following God's commandments and doing what God wants **or** ignoring God's

commandments and God's will. The result as presented here is the difference between life and death not only as individuals but more importantly as a community. They are the people through whom God wants to bring hope and life to the world.

This is not simply about following the rules; it is about a relationship with God. It is about loving God, embracing God. Obedience to God is a "discernment process that involves not only the mind and will, but also and most especially the heart."ⁱ

God is calling on the entire community to make the right decision. Choosing life, choosing to follow God's commandments means a home for everyone. Remember that while they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years they lived on manna or food that God provided daily – enough only for the day so that everyone had enough and no one had more than they needed. They understood that following God has economic implications.

We remember that they were the immigrants seeking a home. Earlier in the book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 26, they were given instructions for how they will bring an offering to God once they are in the promised land. "The priest will take the basket and set it in front of the Lord's altar. Then standing there in front of the place of worship, you must pray: My ancestor was homeless, an Aramean who went to live in Egypt." (Deut:26:4-5b)

The instructions continue with the remembrance of their history, how they became great in number and then were forced into slavery and eventually rescued by God and conclude with, "Now, Lord, I bring to you the best of the crops that you have given me." After bringing their offering they are to share a meal to celebrate and thank God for a good harvest. They are also to invite the Levites and the foreigners who live in their town, remembering that they were also foreigners. (Deut 26:10a, 11b)

This is all part of what they are to take into account when they make the decision whether to choose life or death, whether to follow the God who has guided and protected them or to follow the gods of those among whom they will be living, whether to obey God's commandments and have a relationship with God or to ignore God and go it alone.

Remember that Jesus was Jewish, and it is with all this as background that he spoke to his people and called Israel back to being who God had called Israel to be. He uses a typical rabbi teaching method when he says here, "You have heard it said, but I say...." He is explaining, expanding, and elaborating on the law and the commands that they are to follow. He is getting at the motivation behind them – not just the letter of the law. He is reminding them, and us, what it means to choose life and what fullness of life really looks like if we follow God's ways.

We have today, something about which we can probably all agree. "You shall not murder." Okay, Jesus, we can agree with that – move on.

But it is when he moves on that it starts to get sticky. The first step on the road to murder is anger whether directed specifically or more generally at the one who is killed. So, Jesus warns us to step back and look carefully at how we deal with our anger. If injustice causes our anger, then as far as we are able, we are to act to change the situation and bring about justice. If we are angry at an individual, then we need to find ways to deal with that anger. Here Jesus tells us that calling someone a bad name or insulting that person is part of a slippery slope that can lead to other behavior or attitudes that are dangerous.

I remember as a child a rhyme that was often used to try to ignore bullying or name calling. Do you remember, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me"? It was designed to help a child

who was the victim of name-calling to remain calm and not to retaliate. Of course, I also remember a longer version that ended up calling the other a nasty name, kind of negating the intent.

The reality is that names or words do hurt – and we know that. Unkind words poke a little hole in a relationship. When many of those holes appear then we get a rip and not only can the integrity of the relationship be destroyed but the entire relationship can be destroyed. I remember a woman who had not spoken to her sister for many years. The reason she gave was that her sister had criticized her son. I'm pretty sure that there is more to the story. Whether that was the beginning or the culmination of many years, it was the end of their relationship. I also know that the woman who told me this was probably one of the unhappiest people I have ever known. Words had not only hurt her but she then also became a person who used unkind words to speak of others. Her behavior made it hard for some of us to want to be with her.

Jesus is reminding us, and warning us to be careful of the way we relate to other people. While we need to be careful not to speak unkindly to others we also need to be careful not to allow anger to smolder so that it continues to grow until it becomes an angry monster that cannot be controlled.

We have only to listen to the news to see ways in which unchecked anger has erupted into deadly shootings. We have only to look at Facebook or the news to see how people in government and others make gestures of contempt toward the opposition. When someone posts something that supports a particular view, it is not uncommon to see responses that are rude and argumentative. This is not anything new. In Jesus' day, the Romans were insulting the Jews, the Jews were insulting

the Samaritans and others were insulting Jesus. While this behavior may not be new, we need to be particularly careful not to allow it to become something that we get used to and accept as normal. Many of our schools have a zero tolerance for bullying and we work hard to teach children to be nice to each other but there are too many examples around us of adults who do the same or worse.

I remember a vivid example of two people who were an example to many of how to create right relationships even while disagreeing strongly. Some of you may remember Rev. Bob Sweet who was our District Superintendent back in the late 1980's. Bob and Rev. Dan Weaver couldn't have been further apart on their views about Gay rights as we called it back then. For many years, Bob and Dan would stand together at the podium of Annual Conference to make a witness to those of us gathered there. Bob and Dan disagreed strongly on the subject, but they remembered and lived something that was very important to them. They knew that they were both followers of Jesus Christ and that their views were based on what they understood of the Bible and what it meant to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. Through the years, they had also developed a good relationship with each other and they respected the other even while disagreeing strongly about something that they felt passionate about. They modeled for us disagreeing without putting the other down in any way and without questioning the integrity and faith of the other. They modeled how to disagree in love.

The Jewish law – and the Christian law – are grounded in love and love is acted out in deeds of loving-kindness. Jesus takes the commands of the law and shows how they become a blueprint for a way of being fully, genuinely, gloriously human. When we take seriously what Jesus says, it

goes deep down into the roots of our personality and produces a different pattern of behavior altogether.ⁱⁱ

Jesus tells us that we need to focus on being reconciled with those who have hurt us, or those whom we have hurt. I will be the first to acknowledge that reconciliation is not always possible and in some cases where there has been abuse, reconciliation may even be dangerous. True reconciliation can only take place when both parties want to be reconciled and when both parties value the other as a child of God, a person of worth. When reconciliation with the other is not possible or wise, we can still seek help from God so that we are not held captive by hatred or anger.

Forgiveness and reconciliation begins with the knowledge that we have been forgiven by God and that we can then forgive those with whom we are in conflict. Please do not hear this to say that we need to put ourselves in a position where a person can continue to harm us. I do not believe that God wants that for us, but at the same time God does not want us to be harmed by smoldering anger and resentment.

If we are going to follow God by creating right relationships, we need to be like Clara Barton who was never known to hold resentment against anyone. "One time a friend recalled to her a cruel thing that had happened to her some years previously, but Clara seemed not to remember the incident. 'Don't you remember the wrong that was done you?' the friend asked Clara. She answered calmly, 'No, I distinctly remember forgetting that.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

"Choosing life sounds like such an easy thing to do, yet it always ends up being difficult. Choosing life means letting go of our resentments. It means forgiving the injuries we have received. It means taking the high

road. It means we are called to be better, that we may receive the blessings that true life bestows.”^{iv}

As we continue to look at who we are and who God calls us to be, I invite all of us to pay attention to our relationships. Pay attention to how we speak to others and to ask ourselves the very simple question, “Do I want someone else to speak to me like this?” As we choose life, we will discover that this life we are choosing is better than anything we can imagine. It doesn’t mean that everything will go smoothly for us. It doesn’t mean that there will not be any problems in life or that we will have everything we want, or even everything we think we need. It does mean that our lives will be filled with an abundance and a peace that is satisfying in ways we might not have known about.

Choosing life and along with it, creating right relationships will be a blessing that will likely also have ripple effects in the lives of others. We can begin by refusing to be baited into saying things we know we shouldn’t be saying. We can begin by refusing to allow old tapes to dictate the way we interact with other people. We can break the cycle of name-calling or put downs and refuse to participate when others do so. We can begin by praying for those with whom we find ourselves in conflict. We can begin by today choosing life and creating right relationships – ones in which we treat others as the beloved children of God that they are and in which we live with integrity in things both large and small.

I receive a daily email from a pastor in our conference, Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes. He writes about what’s going on or where the scriptures are taking us and how they intersect. Some of his words spoke to me this week and I would like to use them as our closing prayer.

“Jesus is not skipping the law, nor reinterpreting it. He’s getting at the heart of it: not a rule you can get around, but an invitation to love. He’s drawing us deeper into it, into actually caring about the other person, not just making sure we’re legal.

“Jesus, help me. Guide me. When I’m embroiled or offended, help me love that person, not just contain my anger, but deeply respect and cherish them, even as I oppose them. When my own desires flare up, help me to see each person as a precious individual, not an object for either lust or scorn, not an object at all, but a soul, a pilgrim on this journey with me, blessed, imperfect, and worthy. Help me speak and act for their sake, for their sake, in love for them, as you love me.

“Jesus take me deeper.”^v Amen

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wright, Tom: Matthew for Everyone

ⁱⁱⁱ Hewett, James S Illustrations Unlimited, p.215 #10

^{iv} Abingdon Worship Annual 2017.

^v Steve Garnaas-Holmes *Unfolding Light* www.unfoldinglight.net