

Jesus Preaches on Relationality

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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The Sermon on the Mount of Jesus continues, from the vantage point of the storyteller Matthew. In a nutshell, Jesus sermon touches on 4 issues: reconciliation; divorce; adultery and swearing on oaths. But, crystallized into one simple theme, Jesus here is addressing the problem of his time and ours, of broken relationships.

He is speaking to the reality of most of his listeners at the time. Remember that the original listeners of this sermon of Jesus are not largely those in power, they are in fact those who felt disempowered, those whose spirit was broken (Jesus called them poor in spirit) the grieving, the persecuted; generally, the outsiders.

Do we feel among that number? Sometimes, many of us might think. Other times, though, we feel the edge in the comments Jesus make about those who cling to their possessions, how they, we, will not inherit the kin-dom until we can let go.

Here Jesus seems to be speaking about broken relationships - not just a quick and easy fix, but wisdom that might help to rebuild relationships and a sense of community. If he is speaking of deeper healing of broken relationships and fragmented community, then I think many of us are listening.

The strange translation that Freda read the Gospel from this morning was the *Cotton Patch Gospel*, a paraphrase written by Southern Baptist minister Clarence Jordan.

Jordan's goal was to communicate the New Testament in the idiom of the South so that "plain folks" could better understand it. To do this, Jordan, who worked from Greek texts, changed both the setting and the language of the New Testament. For example, John the Baptist conducts baptisms in the Chattahoochee River, the disciple Peter is given a "Yankee" accent... ¹

These teachings of Jesus in today's reading were revising the Commandments of Moses; re-framing ancient Law to help listeners to understand not just the letter of the law, but the spirit at the heart of it.

In our modern vernacular, Jesus might say of murder: it is easy to say that killing someone is wrong. When you let anger or ill-will fester in you toward someone in your family, or a friend, or maybe neighbour whom you think is ignorant, that anger, like an infection left to fester, becomes as insidious as murder. Anger, judgmental attitudes left unchecked, grudges – they destroy families and communities.

On divorce and adultery, Jesus indulges in exaggeration, and one commentary reminds us that this clearly comes from the perspective of a man. Note that here we have Jesus, a male teacher addressing men about the dangers of coveting. You and I as modern-day theologians might re-imagine this teaching. It could be addressed to any gender or

¹ New Georgia Encyclopedia. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/cotton-patch-gospel>

experience – I can tell you that I have certainly known a few women in my life in committed relationships who struggled with “wandering eye”. To our modern reality, Jesus might well speak to any partners struggling with issues that might threaten their committed relationship.

These teachings of Jesus lift up the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from the mountain in the Hebrew Scripture. These were not distinct, rigid, rules to be followed “or else.” The commandments, like those Beatitudes we talked about a couple of weeks ago, were meant to be seen in the big picture, as painting a panoramic image of how we build “community” grounded in respect and love.

Jesus in today’s portion of his sermon on the mount is going deeper, and pointing out that intentions matter as much as our outward actions. Negative behaviours we see likely after anger, loathing, grudges lurk inside of people, and undermine our relationships.

Scholar Eric Baretto observes how Jesus puts broken relationships into the perspective of worship. Well, two people with bad blood between them don’t belong in a worship space. Sisters or brothers with issues between them must leave the holy space, find reconciliation, then they can worship God. Anger and ill-will don’t just infect relationships between people, they infect our relationships with our Creator, too.

Put into positive terms: *Relationality is itself a way to draw near to the God who calls us to righteousness.*² To be righteous, remember, is to have right relationship both with God and with our interdependent community.

Jesus surely must have seen the fault lines in his community to have used hyperbole, like suggesting that someone would be better to cut their eye than to covet another’s partner. I’ve seen community disintegrate because unresolved anger.

While in university I shared a house with roommates. Our lack of communication quickly manifested itself in a bathroom without toilet paper. At some points we each waited in our bedrooms while one at a time at meals. That was awkward. It was one long series of petty acts, reflecting miserly spirits, and came to a head around exam time when we were impatient and needing to vent. There were epic battles, there was confusion and stress. Then, eventually, just about the time we all moved out, that conflict gave way to deeper understanding and respect.

Our world, in my humble opinion, seems at times a macrocosm of that university house shared by people who were scared to express themselves. People that we see most in the media sure do express themselves, but not always constructively! We can’t do much about the world gone awry. But we can do something about our lives, owning our feelings. Living righteous lives, that is, being in right relationship with our Creator and the people around us. Jesus teaches us that righteousness begins with relationship. Reconciling one relationship at a time is how we do our part in God’s work to build a radical and loving kin-dom here.

² Eric Baretto’s commentary on Matthew 5: 21-37. www.workingpreacher.org