

Breaking Faith

Let me begin this morning by telling you where we are going and why and then we'll get into the meat of that passage from the Gospel According to Matthew.

One of the things I've not quite gotten used to in this pandemic situation of us not meeting in person is that I can't rely on the printed clues that I'm accustomed to giving you about my sermon. Were we together in body today, instead of just in spirit, you'd have in your hands or nearby our worship bulletin. As you took it from one of our host family this morning, someone that you know well and love, you might have noticed the illustration on the front. This morning, it would have been one of Maximino Cerezo Barredo's drawings illustrating a Gospel scene, specifically a picture of Jesus, seated on the side of a steep hill, talking to a gathering of people. Some of you would have likely recognized it as Father Barredo's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, which is indeed the origin of our scripture reading.

You might have also noticed, inside the bulletin, that my sermon for this morning is entitled "Breaking Faith." I always title my sermons hoping that the titles published in the weekly newsletter and bulletin will intrigue you, whet your appetite for what I have to say, and give you, as I said, some clues about what it is I have in mind. I chose this title this week because, as I researched and prayed about the passage I'd chosen, I came to realize that all of what Jesus had to say here is about the different ways we human beings break faith with each other, ignore the social structures that bind us together or deny the promises we've made to each other. And, it seems to me, that this is a topic of some relevance in the United States in the waning days of Summer 2020. Much of our political discourse is focused on who is lying and who is telling the truth, who is ignoring our social compact for commonweal and who is trying to uphold it, who is callous and who is compassionate. Breaking faith is very much a part of our current situation.

This sermon is also the first in a new series for us. For the vast majority of my fifteen years with you all, I've worked from one or another set of recommended readings – mostly from the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary used by Catholics and Protestants around the world, but also from Timothy Slemmons' experimental "Year D" lectionary and the informal lectionary suggested by Brian McLaren in [We Make the Road by Walking](#). Every now and then, I've deviated from those schemes to follow interests of my own – staying with one letter of Paul's, for example, when the lectionary jumps from epistle to epistle. But from now until Advent, I'm working out of a list of my own devising, consisting of Scriptures that either aren't in one of those lectionaries, or ones that I've somehow missed.

In upcoming weeks, you'll hear sermons taken from the books of the prophets Nahum and Obadiah, and also from the historical book of Ezra, none of which are represented in the Revised Common Lectionary. But the passage from Matthew which I read moments ago *is* in the lectionary. The problem is, it's scheduled for the sixth Sunday of Epiphany. Why is that a problem? Well, although the Feast of the Epiphany happens on the same day every year, January 6th, Easter is what we call a "moveable feast," shifting through our sun-based calendar because it's tied, loosely, to the moon-based calendar of the Hebrews. As Easter shifts, so do the six weeks of Lent which precede it. And that means that the season of Epiphany can be longer or shorter depending on when Lent starts. The season of Epiphany only occasionally has six weeks (and even more rarely, seven), which is why, along with various other factors, that I've never

gotten around to preaching this passage of the Sermon on the Mount, which I've otherwise covered pretty thoroughly. Clear as mud?

Most of the time, when you read a book or an article or hear a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount, you'll hear about Jesus' new ethos or new rules for living. Carla Works of Wesley Theological Seminary says in her commentary on this passage that it provides Jesus' answer to the question, "what does the kingdom of God look like?" How, in other words, are we to live in order to build up the Beloved Community and to help bring to fruition our prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?" This particular section of Jesus' teachings is sometimes called "the antitheses," because of its structure: "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." And you'll often hear that Jesus is replacing the old Law with an even stricter standard, one, perhaps, that is impossible to fulfill. I disagree and I think I'm in good company. My late friend and former professor, Glen Stassen, wrote a wonderful little book called Living the Sermon on the Mount, and he quite convinced me that such a thing is possible. According to Stassen, the problem is that people hear the "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." and stop there. But a careful reading of this passage shows that Jesus goes on to provide very practical advice on how to live out the kingdom expectations which he shows us. It is to these practical steps that we will now turn.

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder...' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment..." Glen Stassen's interpretation of this and the other antitheses is that Jesus begins with a recognized problem, a sin, to use old-fashioned church language. For this antithesis, Jesus starts with one of the Ten Commandments, which addresses a problem as old as the human race. Following the initial sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden, the next sin committed by humans in the Genesis account is the murder of one brother by another, the story of Cain and Abel. Having raised that spectre in the minds of his listeners, Jesus gives, not an antithesis, according to Stassen, but rather a description of the spiral of behavior that leads to murder. Cain killed Abel because he was angry with him and, indeed Matthew's Greek word shows this, continued to be angry with him. It festered in him. We don't know from the Genesis account if there were hard words between the brothers, but it is likely. That continual anger, that failure to rebuild broken relationship, the way in which Cain broke faith with Abel by not reconciling with him, is what led to violence between Cain and Abel and it is what leads to violence today. Jesus is warning us; if you don't get things straight between you and the one with whom you are angry, death, either physical or spiritual, is the result.

What is the cure? Well, don't be like Cain and let the anger simmer. Don't let it drag on and on past the time when you would take a gift to the altar, as Cain did. Don't break faith with your sibling by letting nursed anger rather than nursed relationship come between you. Instead, "be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Our NRSV begins the next sentence with "Come to terms quickly" but the Greek is both more powerful and more hopeful. It translates literally as "make friends with..." Jesus is telling us that the solution to violence is not some strict rule of living but an open and welcoming stance to life. Make friends. Don't see a brother or sister as accuser, someone you dread to see, but as friend, someone you look forward to being with. As Glenn Stassen writes, "First, Jesus affirms a traditional teaching, from the Ten Commandments: 'you shall not kill.' Second, he diagnoses vicious cycles of

disrespect and domination that cause murder. Third, in the climax, he shows the way of deliverance...” What Jesus does in this instance is to explain the words of God to Cain in Genesis. “And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” The bubbling anger is the sin lurking at the door. Cain could have mastered it and done well by being reconciled to his brother.

Stassen also remarks that the solution to violence proposed here by Jesus is exactly the way in which God treats us. We have been disobedient to God’s will for our lives, rebelled against God’s plan. God has reason to be angry with us. But instead, God has approached us with an offer of reconciliation. God Godself has come down in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and offered us love and friendship. Despite humankind’s rejection of Jesus, the offer of love and friendship still stands.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Again, Jesus begins with one of the Ten Commandments, then moves on to the spiral of behavior which can lead to our failure in this regard. Jesus then delivers the way out of the spiral, but in the hyperbolic language typical of rabbinic teaching. “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away...” Pretty dramatic language, but Jesus is making a point and it isn’t “boys will be boys.” He is not so subtly demanding that those whose fantasies are leading them to sinful action get ahold of themselves. Men are being held to account – and women to, insofar as they are guilty of looking with lust. This is not, by the way, original to Jesus. Other rabbis who were preaching around the same time are recorded as teaching against looking with lust. Glen Stassen writes: “(Jesus) placed responsibility (for lust) squarely on men for their actions, their habits, their practices...” In other words, no shaming of women for their choice of clothing, their freedom to go where, when, and with whom they choose, or their history. New Testament scholars Robert Guelich and Amy-Jill Levine comment that “one can meet the requirements of this demand only by means of a new relationship between men and women... no one should be regarded as a sex object.” We are not to break faith with our sisters or brothers by objectifying them but to honor their personhood.

From lust and adultery, Jesus moves to the likely result of such sins: divorce. Specifically, Jesus is speaking against divorce as it existed in his culture, where a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason, including burning the bread, but women’s freedom of action was far more constrained, in fact if not in law, because a woman without a husband was far more vulnerable than a man without a wife. Carla Works comments, “Jesus’ teaching on adultery and divorce reinforces the dignity of women and warns against a culture of male privilege. In the first century, most women are dependent upon fathers or husbands for their daily livelihood. To be used and discarded for another’s sexual desires had repercussions.” Additionally, she notes, “In contrast to a world where women were treated like property, Jesus’ mission allowed women to be disciples.” Far from participating in what we would now call “frat boy culture,” the “boys will be boys” attitude to which I referred earlier, Jesus stands for equity for women. They were indeed numbered among his disciples, even if the Gospel record and tradition of the Church have obscured this. We should never forget that the Resurrected Christ appeared first to the women, Mary Magdalene in particular, nor his deep friendship with Mary and Martha of Bethany.

Glen Stassen notes that this section of the “antitheses” appears to be lacking its third part. It has the traditional teaching and the spiral of sinful behavior but not the solution from Jesus. He notes, however, that the letters of Paul are earlier than the Gospels and that Paul also relates the teachings of Jesus on divorce. Listen to I Corinthians 7:10-11: “To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.” Did you hear the imperative? “Be reconciled!” Not so very different from Jesus’ teaching about anger: “Make friends!” Is this the missing third piece of the teaching from Matthew? Dr. Stassen certainly thought so and it makes a lot of sense to me. Look, there are many very appropriate reasons to divorce, all of which have to do with breaking faith, whether it is actual adultery, violence, neglect, or other forms of acting in bad faith. But where reconciliation is possible it is to be sought and sought with the kind of diligence with which we should always pursue the will of God.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely...’ There’s the teaching of Torah. “But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.” This is the spiral of behavior that leads to the sin. Every time we have to convince someone by exalted language that we mean what we say, we lose just a little more credibility. How many times do we have to hear a salesperson or a politician say, “Trust me,” before we find that we can’t trust that person at all? The solution: “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.” Jesus has approached these problems in descending order of destruction – murder and abuse, adultery and divorce, lying – but they are all part of the same problem. When we begin to break faith with our sisters and brothers, it becomes a spiraling routine of evil. Break faith with your words and you will break faith with your actions.

Carla Works concludes her commentary on this passage with these words: “Jesus wants his disciples to be people of integrity, people who are faithful to their promises, people who have no need to swear that they are telling the truth because they are truth-tellers. They should be people who honor their commitments in marriage and who respect the commitments of others. The women in their midst are not people to be used and abandoned at will, but fellow disciples. They are among the ones who are now blessed by God’s reign. For the church to claim Jesus’ message of God’s kingdom come, it must strive to be the kind of place that reflects God’s reign.”

As we turn to our remembrance of Jesus with bread and grape, as we say together again the words of the prayer he taught, let us commit ourselves anew to seeking God’s will, to working for God’s kingdom to come, to building up among all of our sisters and brothers the Beloved Community which we understand to be the dream of God and the mission of Jesus, now our mission as the Body of Christ. Let us commit to be truth-tellers in the face of a society that honors liars. Let us commit to honor each other’s relationships in the face of a society which makes adultery a joke. Let us commit to non-violence and the way of reconciliation, even as our cities burn and men and women of violence take up arms against “the other.” Let us live into the Way of Jesus that is the Way of Life for us, our neighbors, and our planet. Thanks be to God! Amen.