

How To Do Community Without Really Trying
The Rev. Amy Spagna
February 12, 2023 – Epiphany 6A
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

This set of readings is heavy, kind of like, say, a nice rich Alfredo or other cream sauce. Their texture is rich and silky thanks to the cream and butter which have been heated up and stirred together to form their base. They're substantial, to the point where they can overwhelm a dish if they're not used carefully. And if one eats too much of them too quickly, they sit like a lump in the bottom of the stomach after a while. The compilers of the lectionary have served up such a dish for us today, one that's heavy on rules and instructions for following them, and, at least on the surface, not so hopeful in the context of life in 21st century America.

On the other hand, if you look at where we are on the liturgical calendar, only 10 days out from the beginning of Lent, with its focus on reconciliation, fasting, and self-denial, it makes at least some sense to hear a reminder that the law is intended to be life-giving, not life-draining, as well as what all that implies for the community as a whole. To that end, most of what Jesus has to say in this section of the Sermon on the Mount is about how the very human thing of emotion affects not just us as individuals, but the people around us as well. It raises some very real issues: How do we handle things like resentment, hate, and desiring what isn't ours? And, what are the real effects of things like holding grudges, readily disposing of other people when they are no longer useful or attractive to us, and swearing oaths to anyone besides God?

Jesus has already told the crowd that's gathered to hear him teach his interests lie solely in the fulfillment of the Law. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, which is its rhetorical center and continues through the end of this chapter, he lays out exactly

how he's going to do it. Jesus' intention is not to make the law bigger and badder, with sharper and pointier teeth, but rather to broaden it out so it affects every aspect of our common life. It's worth noting that the "you" in "You have heard it said..." is plural in Greek. That means it's about the collective salvation of the ENTIRE crowd listening to him, and not as much about all the individual "yous" and whatever personal relationship they might enjoy with Jesus and his teachings. It's up to the whole community to put his strong suggestions into action. Yes, it takes individual efforts to get it started, but if the end goal of our efforts is not the well-being and flourishing of the whole community, the risk is very real that Moses' warning that "you shall not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter" (Deut. 30:18, NRSV) will come true. Jesus doesn't say this outright. He doesn't have to, though the implications are clear: HERE is the right way to do things. So get to it!

Jesus raises a total of 6 issues in this section of the sermon, of which we've been presented with four:

- "It's not enough just to refrain from murder. We should also treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful words.
- It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.
- It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable — in this culture that often meant women and children — are provided for.

- It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all."¹

The implications for what Jesus is saying here, especially where "Community" is concerned, are pretty big. They begin with how relatively easy it is to fulfill what the Law requires, and end with how they reflect the fact that God's interests lie primarily with keeping the law for *our* sake, not for the law's sake.² Think about it: What Jesus is actually doing here is to provide a set of basic ground rules for community in general. But, the catch is, we're human, and while we do well with structure, we have a tendency to do the opposite of what we're told is good and right, which is where, and why it's so easy to get so far off track so quickly. One of the better literary descriptions of how that happens is in C.S. Lewis' small book *The Screwtape Letters*. As Screwtape, a senior member of the devil's staff, observes to his nephew Wormwood,

"The Enemy wants [people], in the end, to be so free of bias in [their] own favour that [they] can rejoice in [their] own talents as frankly and gratefully as in [their] neighbour's talents – or in a sunrise, an elephant, or a waterfall. He wants each [person] in the long run, to be able to recognize all creatures (even [themselves]) as glorious and excellent things. He wants to kill their animal self-love as soon as possible, but it is His long-term policy, I fear, to restore them to a new kind of self-love – a charity and gratitude for all selves, including their own; when they

¹ David Lose, "The Relational God." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-relational-god> [accessed February 6, 2022].

² Ibid.

have really learned to love their neighbours as themselves, they will be allowed to love themselves as their neighbours. For we must never forget what is the most repellent and inexplicable trait in our Enemy: He *really* loves the hairless bipeds He has created, and always gives back to them with His right hand what He has taken away with His left."³

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Touchstone Edition (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 59.