

## Life-Giving Law

King of Glory Lutheran Church  
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry  
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Year A: Epiphany 6 Mt 5:21-37

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup>Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. <sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup>But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

*Jesus reinterprets the Law asking people to reflect upon how their actions impact community. The Law is very important to Jesus. Each of us sin and we cannot escape that reality. But the Law-giver, God, intends for these laws to bring life and love not only to individuals, but also to the whole community.*

Beloved of God, take a deep breath. Really, I invite you to take a deep breath. Jesus has some challenging words for us to hear today and a few of them might feel like a stomach punch. When we breathe, we think better, we can listen more fully as well. Breathe in the Holy Spirit who sits with us as we listen.

The title of the sermon is the Life-Giving Law. We begin looking briefly at the lesson from Deuteronomy. Here, Moses is preaching to the Israelites who are on the edge of the Promised land, ready to enter the territory God has given to them. But they must make a choice. Moses uses stark language: life/death, blessing and curse, good and evil. This isn't a time for namby-pamby soft peddling.

Please turn back to page #3 and look at verse 16. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live...

And again, see verse 19. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God's intention was that they would bring life to the community's relationship with God and with itself. Laws that go vertical: Love the Lord your God. Laws that go horizontal: love your neighbor by not stealing, or speaking against, or coveting or killing.

Moses reiterates this to Israel as they prepare to begin a new life. In essence he says, God's Laws equal Life. Real life. Not oppressive life. But the kind of interactions with one another that are life-giving. The kind of interactions with God that yield true life. Furthermore, when we, God's people participate in keeping these laws, we participate in the very life of God. For God's very character is contained in these Laws. God's mercy and justice, God's love and divine desire for humanity are contained and manifested within these Laws.

Every young girl and boy raised in the synagogue memorized God's laws. They could recite them. Those words were on the hard drives of their hearts. Now, when Jesus arrives on the scene, He says to the people, "You have heard that it was said."

Yes, they knew exactly what Jesus was talking about. Jesus was reciting one of God's Laws. Jesus was a devout Jew. Whenever possible, He lifts up the Laws of his religious upbringing. And...now He reinterprets them. "But I say..." This is called an 'antithesis' which challenges the widely held idea or viewpoint. Here's a thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

On Sunday mornings, we like donuts. Thesis.

But we really only like the donuts from Donut Haus. Antithesis

It matters to church members where we buy the donuts from. Synthesis

Jesus is lifting up an antithetical viewpoint to the original laws so that people can hear them in a new way. If He sounds angry, He might be. For in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is very concerned with God's laws that have become oppressive, not life-giving. Matthew wants the church to understand how it is the church as it follows Jesus. God's will is reflected in the laws, but as they are interpreted by Jesus. In the text for today, Jesus chooses three laws that impact the community. Murder and anger. Divorce and adultery. Swearing by the Lord's name.

Being angry is a form of murder. When we are angry with another person in our heart, we might choose to not be in relationship with them. I don't know about you, but I can hardly drive on I-25 without saying, 'you fool!' (or something worse) in my heart to another driver.

Jesus says, 'When you are angry with your brother or sister and you don't resolve it, there will be a rift in the community. The power and unity of the community is lessened when the council has to pronounce judgement upon you, and you are sitting in prison.'

Keeping in mind God's laws are to protect both individuals and the community, Jesus goes on to speak about adultery and divorce. No one is to be treated like a piece of property. For in those days a man could divorce a woman for something as benign as burned toast, or a messy house. The law reveals God's ultimate will, but it must be interpreted through the law of love. Jesus is saying, no one can be simply be thrown out. Divorce, like anger cuts a tear through the community. He uses exaggerated language about throwing an eye away and cutting off one's hand to make the point that married and single people need to stall temptation and deal with potential problems right away.

Finally, the conventional thought of the day was that one must always follow through on a vow. Jesus instead insists that one not make a vow in the first place. Keeping those promises can depend on circumstances beyond our control. Watch your language and let a simple 'yes' or 'no' suffice.

I'm hoping you are hearing that for Jesus, God's laws intend to make the community the best it can be. Safe. Loving. Kind. Caring. To that end, it takes each person in a community and in the church, to create that safe, loving, kind and caring space. God's laws are meant to be life-giving and not oppressive. Angry words, wandering outside of committed relationships and broken promises all destroy the community God desires. Jesus is headed towards the Greatest Commandments: Love God with all of yourself and love your neighbor also.

Now, you and I both know that in 2023, in our country, individuality stands supreme. We prize everything that supports 'me' and 'my' while fighting against almost everything that represents 'us' and 'ours'.

You've heard me talk about doing ministry in South Dakota. They have an individualistic mindset – it has to do with farming and ranching – where you 'pull up your bootstraps' and just get the work done. But in towns of 13,000 or 5,000 or 500, people also understand when one goes down, we all pull together. Fundraising dinners at Pizza Ranch for the teenager with cancer were not only common they were expected. Nobody locked the doors on their houses, because no one would steal from another. It just didn't happen. There was a common understanding that what one person did clearly impacted the rest of the community.

This is what Jesus is talking about. How we stand up for another, how we refuse to let one sex or one race be subjugated to the other, how we let go of our precious 'rights' is how God's divine law gets lived out for the whole community. He is calling us to be the very best version of ourselves, so that true life comes to all.

The truth we know from this passage is that we all sin. Anger, wandering eyes and broken promises are examples of those. No one sin is greater than another. Thus, Jesus implores us to not sin so that we all can have the best of God's love in community. In other words, what you and I do individually during the week, actually reflects back upon the people we are sitting next to on Sunday. We live – so that others can live even better.

Here's my challenge for us this morning, my call to action. I've heard lately that we are getting a bit cliquey. We find our friends and don't seek out everyone before and after worship. Who are those who get discarded even here? Who needs a kind word and a conversation partner? For the sake of us being church, for sake of King of Glory being a life-giving congregation and community, this morning and each week, let's choose life for everyone, not some. For if we practice it here, there's a good chance we'll live it out there. Amen.