**Epiphany: *The Light of the World Has Come***

**Sunday February 16, 2020**

**Sixth Sunday After Epiphany**

**“The Heart of the Matter” (Matthew 5:21-37)**

**1. Introduction: *Rules are Meant to be Broken??***

We’ve all heard or maybe even used the expression, *“Rules are meant to be broken.”* This expression is often used to justify our resistance toward rules and our tendency to bend or break them. For example, you might be driving down the road and going a little bit over the speed limit and someone in the car notices this and points it out. You might be inclined to respond, “Oh well, rules are meant to be broken.” Rules, however, are never made with the intent that they will be broken, but rather, that they will be kept. Yet, the breaking or the bending of rules is always an anticipated response.

When I was growing up, we had several household rules but one of the more memorable ones was *“****no singing at the table****.”* As a child I never understood the rationale for this rule, but now, with a very loud and lively family, I get it. Sometimes you just want some peace and quiet while you’re eating your dinner. Growing up, though, I often wondered about the limits of this rule. For instance, if I got up from the table, stood in the kitchen and broke out into song, would that be okay? Was singing only forbidden at the table during dinnertime? Even a trivial rule like this one compelled me to challenge it, to bend it and to break it. Years later I asked my Dad why we had this rule. He responded, “You know the old saying, ‘*If you sing at dinner, you’ll be crying by bedtime.’”* I couldn’t believe it. A rule that dominated my childhood was based on some old folk wisdom!

Rules dominate our lives. Everywhere we go there are rules to follow. This morning’s Gospel lesson is all about rules, specifically, the Old Testament laws. In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives a new set of teachings, which are presented in stark contrast to the Mosaic Law. Here Jesus defines God’s will in radical and surprising ways, fulfilling the law by going the beyond the law. His words suggest that simply following the rules is not enough; one needs to get to the heart of the matter.

**2. The Antitheses: *You have heard it said, but I say to you***

Right before this passage, Jesus gave this challenge to his followers, “*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:20). The scribes and the Pharisees were known for their rigorous observance of the Law, but by following the rules they weren’t necessarily doing the will of God. Oftentimes, they focused on the minutiae of the Law and missed the heart of the matter. For Jesus, the essence of the law was *love*. When someone asked him which commandment was the *greatest,* he replied:

“*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*.”

Jesus encouraged his disciples to seek the better righteousness by living a life of love. On the heels of Jesus’ call to a better righteousness, we find a set of *six* *antitheses* (Matthew 5:21-48). They are called the *antitheses* because in each one Jesus is drawing a *contrast* between an Old Testament commandment and his new teaching. In all six cases Jesus says, “*You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .*” In this way he was conversant with the Old Testament Law, while radically redefining its demands and pointing to a better understanding of God’s will for his people. If *love* is central to God’s will for us, then each of these antitheses has something to do with love.

*Love makes peace.* Jesus begins by citing the sixth of the Ten Commandments, “*You shall not murder*” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). His new teaching expands this commandment to address the hostile feelings and words that readily lead to acts of violence (Matthew 5:21-22). Jesus is clearly saying that anger towards another person and anger that is expressed in verbally abusive language is just as wrong as murder. The problem with just following the rules is that we can convince ourselves that we’re okay since we haven’t murdered anyone, while harbouring anger, bitterness, and resentment in our hearts toward others. Jesus compels us to look into our hearts and to confront the negative feelings that we have toward others. He also calls us deal with these negative feelings by making the peace with those who we are in conflict with.

Jesus uses two scenarios, worship in the Temple and a lawsuit in the court, to emphasize the importance of reconciling with others. If you're in the Temple and you're about to give your offering to God and you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right (Matthew 5:23-24). God wants us to work things out with our sisters and brothers before we work things out with him. So, let's deal with the conflict and the disagreements that we have with each other in healthy ways and seek reconciliation. Let’s not play a religious game by going through the motions of worship and acting as if everything is okay while bubbling under the under the surface there's anger, bitterness, hurt, and a lack of forgiveness. God wants us to deal with that unhealthy stuff before we even offer our worship and praise to him.

The scenario of Temple moves to the setting of the law court as Jesus advises his followers to deal with legal matters *quickly,* to settle our differences before the situation becomes worse (Matthew 5:25-26). When applied to our relationships within our families, our places of work, our church and our neighbourhoods, this means that we deal with conflict promptly and do not let the animosity linger. Avoiding or putting off conflict resolution allows anger, hurt, and bitterness to fester in our hearts until we are imprisoned by animosity that we feel toward others. The apostle Paul wrote, “Don’t sin by letting anger control you. Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27). God’s love compels us to resolve the conflicts that we have with each other. *Love makes peace.*

*Love honours boundaries.* Jesus’ teaching moves from the subject of anger to the equally intense feeling of sexual desire. Jesus cites the seventh of the Ten Commandments, “*You shall not commit adultery”* (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22). According to the Old Testament Law, adultery was an act in which a married person had sexual relations with someone other than their spouse. Again, Jesus points out that the outward act has its root within the heart of a person. Adultery does not begin in someone else’s bedroom, but in the cravings of one’s heart to have sex with someone other than their spouse (Matthew 5:27-28). Again, simply following the rules can lead to a false sense of holiness, thinking that you’re faithful to your spouse and to God as long as you’re not sleeping with someone else. Yet Jesus bids us to address the sexual desires that we have for others that are hidden deep within our hearts and to take decisive action to nip adultery in the bud (Matthew 5:29-30). In this way we can avoid the destructive and hurtful consequences of adultery by dealing with the wayward desires of our hearts and the leering looks that we think nobody notices. God’s love is expressed in our fidelity to our spouses in mind, heart, body and soul. *Love honours the boundaries of the marital relationship.*

*Love keeps commitments.* Still on the subject of marriage, Jesus urges married people to preserve to maintain their commitment to each other. This antithesis discusses the sensitive subject of divorce. Jesus begins by citing a law from Deuteronomy 24:1, “*If a man marries a woman and then it happens that he no longer likes her because he has found something wrong with her, he may give her divorce papers, put them in her hand, and send her off*.” Jesus goes on to condemn this practice of quick and easy divorce because it cheapens and trivializes the marital union. At the time of Jesus, one school of Jewish scholars argued that a man could divorce his wife if she burnt his supper. In contrast to this, Jesus argues that only in the most serious of situations should a marriage be dissolved. Jesus’ words challenge us to be committed to our marriages and to work through the problems that threaten this relationship.

Marriage is hard work and it involves a deep commitment to face the many challenges of married life. I give this advice to the young people of our congregation who may some day be getting married. Go into marriage with your eyes wide open because love is blind and marriage is a real eye-opener. Have a good awareness yourself and of your spouse so that you will be able to anticipate the kinds of challenges that you will face together. Many pastors and trained counsellors offer marriage preparation sessions that will help you to identify areas where your relationship is strong and where it needs to grow stronger. In your preparation for the wedding day, don’t ignore the far more important preparation for the marriage itself.

To those who are married and experiencing some challenges in your relationship, I encourage you to get help and not to be ashamed of doing so. With my limited experience in observing marriages falling apart, I can honestly say that one factor is waiting too long to get counselling. Most people think that marriage counselling is only for those whose relationship is in dire straits. But at that point there’s so much water under the bridge that it’s almost impossible to untangle the web of anger, hurt, conflict and betrayal. The key to reconciliation is getting help early and nipping the problems in the bud before they’re allowed to grow. I'm just as guilty as anybody of being resistant to going to counselling and admitting that I need help. God’s love compels us to foster healthy marriages. *Love keeps commitments.*

*Love speaks the truth.* It’s quite interesting that my sermon today ends with Jesus’ words about telling the truth (Matthew 5:33-37). In this antithesis, Jesus is reacting to the tendency within his culture to swear an oath by heaven, earth or one’s own head in order to guarantee the truthfulness of one’s statements. In a world where an oath is needed to guarantee the truth, the power of the lie still holds sway. Jesus’ words portray Christian community as the place where truth is the norm at all times; where a *yes* means *yes* and a *no* means *no.* We are called to be honest with each other.

The trouble is that it’s easier to follow the rules and to look religious than to be honest about what's going on deep within our hearts. Last weekend I was at Blizzard with the youth. The retreat speaker was excellent and he dealt with some pretty heavy topics. His main theme was that we often present an image of ourselves that we want our friends, our family, and our church to see. But hiding behind this mask is everything going in our lives that we don’t want people to know about - our failures, our insecurities, our brokenness, our sins, our struggles, our mental illness, our past and our pain. We hide these things because we're afraid being judged, afraid of being rejected, and afraid that people will think less of us. So, we hide. Young people hide things from their parents. Married people hide things from their spouses. Pastors hide things from their congregations. We project an image of ourselves that hides the contents of our hearts. But Jesus bids us to get to the heart of the matter.

The book of James says, “*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed”* (James 5:16). One of my Seminary professors said that if we truly practiced this, we wouldn’t need therapy. What he was saying was a lot of the hang-ups in our lives are the result of pushing things down and not being honest with what’s really going on.It’s a lot easier to follow the rules, to look religious and to put on a good face. It’s much more difficult to confront the hidden things in our heart. But *love speaks the truth.*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
    test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
Point out anything in me that offends you,  
    and lead me along the path of everlasting life.*

(Psalm 139:23-24)