2-4/5-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 5:21-37 Choose Life Choosing God’s Kingdom Series

Think about all of the choices you have already made today. Get out of bed or hit the snooze button one more time. Come to church or stay home. Yell at the kids or be patient with them. Be kind to your spouse or nag him to hurry up. What to eat or not eat. Which shirt to wear and which pants to wear and whether or not that shirt matches those pants.

Once here you decide whether or not to hang up your coat. Where to sit. Who to greet. What frame of mind to approach worship. Whether or not to listen to the sermon.

Just think of the myriad of choices -magnificent and mundane- that you have decided/ will face today! Are you exhausted yet? Every day we make choices. Some are minor, some are life-changing. Some we make without thought, some we make with much thought. And like it or not, every choice has an effect on us.

Our scripture passages this week and next call us to choose how we will live in relationship with God and with one another. They come from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount- his teaching to his disciples on God’s kingdom ways in this world. Two weeks ago we pondered the Beatitudes and our blessedness. Last week we heard a call to be God’s salt and light in this world, a call to reflect God’s ways in the midst of our daily lives.

Today we begin to hear Jesus’ call to choose how we will live. Will we live based on our selfish desires or seeking God’s desire for our lives? Will we live out our faith as central to our lives or as fire insurance for eternity? Will we live based on rules or on relationships? If we choose to follow Jesus, what does it look like to live by God’s kingdom ways in this world?

Jesus begins to give us concrete examples today based on what his followers would know well- the Law of Moses. He reminds us of specific behaviors limited in the Law ("You have heard that it was said ..."), yet then goes deeper than the behaviors to their underlying attitudes ("... but I say to you ..."). Jesus challenges us to not simply know the Law, but to live differently because of the intentions for healthy relationships that undergird the Law.

In the 19th century William James once said, Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.

--Karen Georgia Thompson Sermon Seeds 2-13-11ucc.org/worship

Jesus is calling us today to look deeper than our behaviors, deeper than our obedience to the Law and the Ten Commandments, deeper than a desire to simply do what is right and stay away from what is wrong. Jesus is calling us today to transform our attitudes and motivations that undergird our behaviors so that they are God-driven rather than culture-driven in all of our relationships, with God and with other people. And the good news of the Gospel reminds us that when we are open to God’s Holy Spirit, the Spirit is the one who will transform our lives. When we choose life in obedience to God, then God will guide us to a new way of life.

Today’s passage is not easy to hear. The concrete examples Jesus chose as his teachings are timeless—and if they hit too close to home for you today, like several of them did to me, you might say that Jesus is meddlin’. Yet he meddles with a purpose—to call us to choose a way of life that honors God and honors each other.

Jesus first calls us to change not only our behavior—you shall not murder—but also the attitude of anger found behind the murderous behavior. Is this not a timeless example?

The slogans "Black Lives Matter," "Blue Lives Matter," and "All Lives Matter" remind us that we all want a world in which people can live without fear of being murdered. -- “Jesus’ Stretch Goals” homileticsonline.org 2-12-17

Sadly there are websites that track the number and the location of every shooting in the city of Chicago. As of Saturday morning they already had 332 shootings for this year, with 54 deaths. --crime.chicagotribune.com/chicago/shootings

We may want to pat ourselves on the back that we have not murdered anyone this week, yet consider the attitude of anger that leads to murder. How many of us have lashed out at the seemingly incompetent driver blocking the road ahead of us? How many of us have spread malicious gossip that could ruin someone’s reputation? How many of us have created rifts in relationships with harsh words? How many of us have responded on social media in negative ways that we would never have the guts to say face to face?

There is a time and a place for righteous anger- At the injustice of human trafficking (like we hear around Super Bowl weekend) or at the children left behind by heroin addiction (when the Montgomery County morgue has more bodies than it can handle) or at the lack of viable health care for the poor.

Yet more often than not we are surrounded by anger that begins with name calling then moves to throwing punches physical or verbal then leads to murder. Any anger seeks to divide rather than heal.

For the past six months I have dreaded turning on the news because of the toxic anger I have seen spewing from the left, right and in between. Toxic anger refuses to respect, refuses to be civil, refuses to listen to another’s experience. The anger that leads to murder is that anger that simmers within us, festering on real and perceived hurts, an anger that refuses to let go, refuses to reconcile, refuses to be forgiven. This simmering, toxic anger is what Jesus is calling sinful, anger that damages relationships before it ever damages lives.

.. Franklin Roosevelt's closest political advisor was a man named Louis Howe.

Mr. Howe, with some frequency, would be very rude and cruel to certain people at dinner or cocktail parties. On one such occasion Eleanor Roosevelt asked, "Louis, why did you do that?" "Because," Howe replied, "he was once unsupportive of Franklin." "Oh goodness," Eleanor exclaimed, "I'd forgotten all about that." "I never forget," Howe snapped back.

-- Scott Hoezee cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek 2-13-11

Pastor David Leininger likes to share a story about his grandmother, ... a shy and sensitive lady who lived to be just three weeks’ shy of her 100th birthday. When she was a young girl, about ten years old or so, somebody told her that she had a terrible singing voice. Now, most of us would not let that remark bother us particularly, but it DID bother his grandmother. Ten years old is a tender age. It bothered her so much that, for the remaining 90 years of her life, she never sang another note. He had no idea whether Grandmother had a good voice or a bad voice; she would never take the chance of letting anyone find out, and all because of one person's careless and unfeeling insult.

-- David Leininger leiningers.com Make It Right! 3-19-00

Years ago, a Jordanian pilot was burned to death by the Islamic State, and the news was full of angry talk. "I demand none of them amongst us be kept alive," said the pilot's grieving father. "I demand the revenge be greater than executing prisoners." A politician in Jordan said, "Let's kill their children! Let's kill their women!" Such anger is understandable, but revenge and punishment will not bring peace to the Middle East. Violence is a cycle deeply rooted in human nature, and revenge killings have kept this wheel turning for thousands of years.

-- “Jesus’ Stretch Goals” homileticsonline.org 2-12-17

The only hope for renewal of such anger is forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation.

.. Will Smith once said: Throughout life people will make you mad, disrespect you and treat you bad. Let God deal with the things they do, cause hate in your heart will consume you too. --Karen Georgia Thompson Sermon Seeds 2-13-11ucc.org/worship

We have a choice on how to live in relationship with others. Will we choose anger, that further divides, or will we choose reconciliation, that strives for peace and renewed relationships?

Next Jesus calls us to change not only our behavior—you shall not commit adultery—but also the attitude of lust behind the adulterous behavior.

Healthy relationships are based on commitment, faithfulness, and trust. Yet when one spouse strays outside of the bounds of marriage, those bonds of faithfulness and trust are shattered.

Jesus challenges us that the attitude of lust also destroys our faithfulness in relationships. Our human nature will naturally appreciate beauty. Lust occurs when we take that appreciation into sexual fantasy not based on real relationships. Lust occurs when our appreciation turns into objectification that demeans and dehumanizes another for our own pleasure. Lust also occurs when we allow our desire for success, for power, or for control to allow work, sports, games, or even the internet to overtake our primary relationships.

Jesus calls us to healthy bodies and healthy minds. While we are not going to literally tear out an eye or cut off a hand if we give in to lust, we may want to put limits on the sites we connect to or the movies we watch or the conversations we engage in.

The way to overcome lust is to continually choose our commitments over our desires, having the self-discipline to choose only what will honor and respect everyone with whom we have a relationship, romantic or platonic, at home and at work.

Next Jesus calls us to change not only our behavior—stop with the certificates of divorce—but also the attitude of a disposable society.

In order to understand this passage, we need to understand Jesus’ context. While Deuteronomy allowed for divorce in certain situations, in the time of Jesus if a man did not like something his wife did, or simply got tired of her, it was too easy to abandon her and throw her away like trash at a fast food restaurant. Women were considered property, wholly dependent on the men in her life, and thus had no legal standing or recourse to stop the divorce.

That flippancy toward divorce is still part of our disposable culture today that says try marriage for a few years and if you get tired of one another you can always get a divorce later.

Here, Jesus is saying that divorce should not be an easy thing to acquire, because marriage is one of the foundations of family and community life. Marriage has always been a way to protect vulnerable women and children. God’s ideal is a lifelong covenant of marriage that reflects God’s covenant with creation.

Nowadays, there are circumstances where marriage is not always healthy nor is reconciliation always possible. There are times when divorce is an act of grace, and some of you here today are living testimony to the grace of remarriage.

Yet God’s desire is for marriage vows to be taken seriously, for divorce to not be seen as an easy alternative to struggle, and for any who may be estranged to seek to be reconciled.

Relationships take hard work. There will be times when we will not agree, times when we argue, times when we struggle to be on the same page. Yet through the struggle comes the growth. When we approach any relationship with an attitude of a disposable society, then we will never do the hard work that say commitment calls us to, to be there for one another for the long road. Jesus calls us to care for one another, through thick and thin, and strive for reconciliation when possible.

Finally, Jesus calls us to change not only our behavior—you shall not swear falsely—but also the attitude that our words have no meaning.

Alternate facts—relative truth—fake stories—our society is bombarded daily with meaningless words which lead to false promises. People swear to tell the truth, and then they blatantly lie, whether in court, in politics, in the media, or even in communities of faith. A man’s word is no longer assumed to be his honor.

Eugene Peterson’s translation of these verses in *The Message* has Jesus meddlin’ even farther into our faith lives by saying, “Don’t say anything you don’t mean.

This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true.” (v33-36)

So nowadays almost everything anyone says is suspect. Do we mean what we say? Will we do what we say we will do? If we are not honest ourselves, how can we expect others to be honest with us? Will we make a pledge that we know we have no intention of ever keeping?

.. For generations, the Quakers refused to follow our legal system's requirement that witnesses in court must place their hand upon a bible and "swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." They were criticized, and ridiculed and in some cases, incarcerated for their refusal to take an oath. But because they have gained the reputation of being honest people, they are, in some courts, no longer required to swear on the bible. They are known as truth-tellers. --Steve Molin, “The Power of a Promise” sermons.com

They are the ideal for honesty and integrity in truth and speech.

Too often nowadays we don’t respect one another enough to tell the truth, so we invent little white lies that become larger with each telling. We twist words around and manipulate others through our words, when God’s desire is to see us speak clearly, honestly, with integrity in all our relationships. And then we abuse the name of God, carelessly using holy names as cusswords or ending our oaths with “so help me God” when we have no intention of allowing God to help us.

This is an issue of character. As people who reflect the light of Christ, we are called to be people of our word, people others can trust in that our yes is yes and our no is no. The basis for any healthy community is truth and trust, two elements of character in short supply nowadays. Will we choose to honor others through truth telling and following through on doing what we say we will do?

Today Jesus dealt with the commandments of murder, family loyalty and truth telling.

Yet anyone can live by these rules. Don’t do this—check. Do this—check.

Jesus also went deeper than the rules to the principles behind the rules. What do our actions say about our hearts, and our desire to be in relationship with God and with others? How are we dealing with anger, with lust, with a disposable society, and with not telling the truth in ways that honor our relationships?

.. .. Aaron Miller was once one of the chief United States negotiators for peace in the Middle East but then moved from operating at the global, political level, to work at the local, personal level. He became President of Seeds of Peace, a non-profit organization that tries to enable reconciliation between Arab and Israeli teenagers through one-on-one encounters. Mr. Miller is convinced that the only hope left is at the grassroots level. Miller quoted a young participant in the Seeds for Peace program, who said, "In order to make peace with your enemy, you have to make war with yourself." In other words, we must battle our own hateful instincts. -- Susan Andrews “The Embassy at 66011” from Sermons on the Gospel

Readings, From the Washington Post, 1/31/02, p. A20.

That is true for peace in the Middle East, and true for peace within our relationships in our lives. Not only should our behaviors reflect Christ, our attitudes should reflect Christ. Our attitudes influence the choices we make every day, and every day we are called to choose life.

In a few minutes we will share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion, a reminder that Jesus chose death as a way to reconcile us back into right relationship with God.

If Jesus chose death in order that we may live, can we then choose to let go of those attitudes and behaviors that damage our relationships with ourselves, with one another and with God in order that we may have abundant life?

Choose a life that honors God and honors the community of God around us. Choose to live by God’s kingdom ways of relationships in this world. May we allow the Holy Spirit to influence and transform our motivations, so that our behaviors then begin to reflect God with us.

May we choose life, this day and every day.

Let us pray.