

Sermon: Turning the Accusing Finger 180°**Scripture: Matthew 5:21-37****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 12, 2017**

Jesus came with a new teaching and the people were amazed. Even though he was from po-dunk Nazareth, conceived illegitimately before marriage and the son of a lowly carpenter – all the people around him were amazed by how he spoke with such authority. They would hardly expect Jesus of Nazareth to be *learned* much less to speak with an expertise that superseded that of the scribes, the Pharisees, even the High Priest. And maybe even more striking, he seemed to have authority over their own hearts, their own consciences... as though he knew the truth of them, the truth of others, the truth of existence itself... which is why eventually they decided that he was actually in himself the audible word of God. What a strange and mysterious and majestic claim made about a human being.

The Sermon on the Mount was the heart of his teaching, so we listen carefully as strange and difficult as they may be to hear. And they are difficult. You are liable to judgment not just if you murder but if you harbor anger in your heart, not just if you commit adultery but if you look upon a woman with lust in your heart, not just if you swear falsely but if there is anything but truth behind your words at all? To echo the words of the disciples later on in the Gospel who were in a constant state of being stunned by what Jesus said – well then who is NOT liable for judgment?! And that seems to be just the point. Jesus will answer the disciples later by saying “With man it is impossible but with God all

things are possible.” And there is the heart of orthodox Christian theology – we are all judged as guilty, but Jesus receives our guilt unto himself on the cross, and thereby grants us salvation from it.

These sections of the Sermon on the Mount about murder, adultery, divorce, and false swearing, like so much of his teachings, all have the same effect on the listener of rotating the accusing finger 180° back to the self; similar to his statements – “you who have not sinned may cast the first stone” – and then later “take the log out of your own eye before you try to take the splinter out of your neighbor’s eye”. It all has the effect of redirecting our accusing finger in towards our own heart and transforming our pride to humility. It is easy to look at a murderer and say “for shame” but that murder sprang from the very same anger that we harbor in our own hearts. It’s easy to judge an adulterer but what are the ways we lust after others and use the people around us for our own purposes. It’s easy to judge someone for bearing false witness, for bald-faced lying, but what of the lies – white or otherwise – that we tell most everyday? Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will mince no more words and say point blank “judge not lest ye be judged”.

Jesus’ lesson plan is to convict the self-righteous heart to recognize its own failings and shortcomings and as a result ignite a compassionate and merciful response to others in their failings and shortcomings. There are great expectations that God has for all of us as to how we should live and how we should treat one another, but Jesus seems to want those in power and at the top of the social pyramid to hear it in particular, because its mostly those people, those men I should

say, who have the means to enforce the judgment on others and yet to allow themselves off the hook. So Jesus puts them back on the hook.

It's worth noting how radical Jesus' statement about divorce was and how difficult it likely would have been for the men around him to hear what he had to say on this point. Remember that in this culture a woman was the man's property along with his children. It was not unheard of for a man on a whim to divorce his wife and as a result leave her ruined in that society. To Jesus' teaching that a man should stay with his wife at almost all cost is a massive challenge to the patriarchal system of the day. A reasonable male response to Jesus' words here would have been – who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do with my property? And yet they sensed exactly who he was to tell them and for some it convicted their hearts while others resisted him to the point of crucifying him, for one doesn't mess with a man's private property. But in this one powerful statement, Jesus yanks the rug out from under the patriarchal system that gave the male power and dominion over everything and Jesus returns the power to God and reminds the man of who is boss, the one we are to love and who requires us to hold others good even before our own – love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

That's where Jesus leads us through his teaching from self-centeredness to other-centeredness, from focus on self - what I got and how I'm gonna keep it – to focus on God and others. We are made to be other-centered, to live for the sake of others, and we make all sorts of trouble when we find ourselves living primarily for ourselves. Since we are on the topic of marriage and divorce, the healthiest marriages are

those where there is a sense that each spouse's "job" in the relationship is more about the other's fulfillment than it is about their own. It's so contrary to what our culture teaches - Pull yourself up by the bootstraps, find yourself, be a self-made person, it's all about self-fulfillment, indulge yourself, be centered in yourself and so on and so forth. That's decidedly not what Jesus teaches, for his teachings are always about faithful and merciful relationship and about what blocks us from that - murder, yes of course but also anger; adultery, yes of course but also lust in the heart, bearing false witness, yes but also white lies and half-truths.

So before we bring our gifts to the altar and complete our worship we need to consider who it is that we are harboring anger toward and commit this week to going to them to be reconciled. And we need to catch ourselves in lustful and covetous desire for others and ask God for forgiveness and to change our hearts. And if a relationship is breaking then we need to look hard enough to consider the possibility that our own self-centeredness could very well be the cause of the discord. And why do we do this. Because God, the Architect of Life, has told us in the words of Jesus that life was meant to be lived this way. And we work at all of this with the awareness that in the end we cannot save ourselves but we must finally lean into the merciful compassion of God who loves and saves - even the likes of us - and then in response offer the same merciful compassion to others in Jesus' name, amen.

Announcement about the Organ

So as many of you know, we are about to get underway with our organ renovation. This is the last Sunday with the organ for a couple of months and if all goes well we'll have it back beautifully restored on Palm Sunday ready for Jeffrey to unleash all its glory. We want to thank the handful of families who have graciously offered to host the men who will be working on the organ, since they are from Gloucester and it'll save time and money for us to have them stay here.

Just a reminder that in order to move forward in a timely fashion we as a church voted to borrow money from the fund that Jena Roy set up for the renovation of Ripley Chapel and the restoration of the organ. So before long we will enter into a fundraising campaign for both Ripley and the organ and we hope you will be excited about these joint projects to enhance the worship and ritual life of our church, and they certainly will.