

Epiphany 6, Year A, 021311
All Saints Episcopal Church

Well, well, well. What are we supposed to do with this Gospel lesson for today? A charming group of sayings attributed to Jesus that leave me all warm and fuzzy - how about y'all?!

What is all that about anyway? Pluck your eye out, cut off your hand, fires of Hell? Really? It's a good thing that most of us are not literalists about the Bible. If we were, we'd be running into mangled faces and hacked off limbs every time we went to the grocery store, or to work, or to the movies. And think about what we'd see here at church: the pews would be filled with people who look like the cast of one of the Chainsaw Massacre movies!

Of course, even the most rabid Biblical literalists don't really believe these verses should be taken literally (you know they pick and choose just like the rest of us, don't you). But if Jesus had said, "If your right hand causes you to sin, go slam your hand in a door," instead of saying cut it off, maybe there would be more of a following for it!

In any event, the sayings are here, whether we like them or not. But the Jesus of healing and compassion and love in the rest of the New Testament couldn't possibly have meant for anyone to really do those things that Matthew says he said. And how can we say that? Well, the best evidence is because there aren't any reports of any of the disciples walking around with empty eye-sockets or a stub on the end of their arms.

So, if Jesus didn't mean those things, then why did he say them in the first place?

He said them to make a point. He used language way over the top, incredibly exaggerated, in order to make the point that sin isn't just about what we do, it's about what we think about as well...what we look at...what we ogle...that separates us from God.

Let's hear that in the translation called *The Message*, which contains more explicitly how our thoughts are as damnable as our actions can be. And please note: Jesus is treating all of these equally. Thoughts equal to deeds. So don't feel guilty about being divorced and think that you are being picked on when we get to that part; I daresay almost every one of us is probably guilty of being angry with a brother or sister, too - that makes us guilty of murder! He's talking about broken relationships.

So here we go:

Matthew 5:21-37 (The Message)

21-22 "You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

23-24 "This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

25-26 "Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you're likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won't get out without a stiff fine.

27-28 "You know the next commandment pretty well, too: 'Don't go to bed with another's spouse.' But don't think you've preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

29-30 "Let's not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here's what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

31-32 "Remember the Scripture that says, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights'? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are 'legal.' Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you're responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you're automatically an adulterer yourself. You can't use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

33-37" And 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. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.

Wow.

Words kill. Make things right. Make the first move. Relationships are more important than vengeance. Better a bloody stump than being discarded for good entirely. Please, no more pretending.

We are supposed to take not only what we do, but also what we think VERY seriously. Our motives matter.

BUT... this is not all there is. Yes, the law is important. But transformation of our behavior alone won't do; adhering to the letter of the law will not give life. Righteousness is not obedience to legislation, but perfect conformity to the will of God. (Green, McKnight, and Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*.)

Our only hope is transformation of the heart. And that is possible because there is ALWAYS, ALWAYS the 'scandalous reality of the Gospel'...which is that God loves us and accepts us no matter what, even in spite of ourselves. Unconditionally. Always. No matter what. This love gives us the power to see the world and the people in it - the people in our lives - with love also. When we embrace God's love for us, we are able to love others as God wants us to.

It's that simple.

Love God.

Love ourselves.

Love others.

So be it.