

“SOMETHING NEW”

Matthew 5:21-37 February 12th, 2017

Over the years I've seen some very clever church signs. Some make me think while others just cause me to groan and roll my eyes. One that is quite popular now is –SIGN BROKEN—Message Inside This Sunday. Here are a couple more that perhaps aren't as familiar: A Closed Mouth Gathers No Foot, Walk with Jesus-It's Cheaper than Gas, How Will You Spend Eternity-Smoking or Nonsmoking?, When You Smile You Spoil the Day for Some Grouch, God So Loved the World That He Did Not Send a Committee, and a very appropriate one for this season of the church year—Beat the Easter Rush—Come to Church This Sunday!

What is “normal fare” at your house? I took a survey of some of the UMW ladies the other day to find out what they considered an “average” meal for their families. Some of the responses were: meatloaf, hamburgers, tacos, goulash, soup, chicken and noodles, a T.V. dinner at times, rice/pasta/potatoes with the main dishes, and spaghetti. A very informal survey as they were working hard at the time filling the Touch of Chocolate boxes. Yes, normal fare is just that ... normal. Yet every once in a while a plate is put down in front of us that contains something different and new. For me it was a meal at the American Legion Post when I tried Rocky Mountain Oysters for the first time. I had always heard about them but they had never been on the menu for me before that day. As I looked down at these Wyoming treats, I was thinking to myself (among other things), **“Now, this...is something new and different.”**

This feeling of excited discovery is what we're intended to experience in Matt. 5:21-31. Each of the three sections within starts the same way. *“You have heard it said...but I say to you.”* The topics themselves are wide-ranging and

alarming: Murder, Adultery, and Divorce. Can you imagine driving past a church sign that said, “This Week at Pine Bluffs UMC: Murder, Adultery, and Divorce”? For each topic Jesus stands conventional wisdom on its head. Our real problem, *he* says, is not ultimately *murder*, but the anger that lies at its core. Our real problem, he says, is not ultimately *adultery*, but the lust in our hearts. Our real problem, he says, is not when to allow *divorce*, but the brokenness of our relationships.

This week’s theme then represents the way Jesus teaches over the way people had normally taught the law and the prophets. The text refers to the commandments as they have come to us not through Moses, but as interpreted in light of the person and message of Jesus Christ. Jesus is calling his disciples, and us, not just to *understand* the law differently, but to *live* differently because of this new understanding. Again Jesus calls us not so much to “do” something as his followers, but to “be” something as his disciples. Don’t just do this outwardly because the law prohibits it. Be a different kind of person altogether because you follow not just the letter of the law, but because you live the Spirit of the law.

Then, of course, Jesus goes into detail about what he’s trying to teach us. And frankly, the details are difficult. Jesus gets not just into the disciples’ business, but ours as well. He crosses over into some pretty personal stuff, and I don’t know about you, but it makes me uncomfortable to talk about some of these subjects from the pulpit. But I don’t believe that taking the easy road is what you expect and hope from your pastor so here goes...

What does he take on? Our *anger*, our *relationships*, and our inclination for not just telling lies, but accepting *dishonesty*, including everything from outright falsehoods to half-truths, and what we have come to call political correctness.

Let's talk about anger first. According to Jesus, it is anger that is underneath the commandment to not commit murder. Murder is the presenting issue, but anger is the underlying condition that disciples need to address. Anger left unchecked might not result in murder, but it can still be incredibly destructive.

As we listen to the nightly news, we can see the anger of the American people boiling over in unprecedented ways. The frequent incidents of road rage cause us to sit back in amazement that people are actually treating each other this way on our highways. The attacks on our police forces all across the nation also blow our minds when these public servants are only trying to keep us safe from the dangers that surround us. According to an article written in July 2016, the anger of American people is rooted in a dissatisfaction with the economy.

Economic issues that fuel anger include high unemployment, pay inequality, stagnant incomes, and massive debt. Many hardworking people have not had a raise in five or more years, and the median household income is stuck at the level set at 1995. While in past decades Americans believed that hard work would eventually pay off with higher wages and upward mobility, as we move further into 2017, faith in the American dream has declined. People no longer think the future is secure. Middle-aged workers worry they will have enough money for retirement. Many do not believe their children will be able to enjoy the same or better economic status than they have achieved.

Anger has led to playing the blame game on a whole new level. As immigrants and women have entered the workforce in large numbers, at the same time many companies have closed down or moved operations overseas. As a result, those who believed that a middle class lifestyle was in reach have become bitter, enraged, and even violent.

This anger is the real concern, not murder, and it's not only for people today, but for the people to whom Jesus was speaking. Anger is what fills us up and threatens to boil over. And it is this, says Jesus, that his disciples need to address first.

As it turns out, this anger is something that the church is particularly well-equipped to help people navigate. Jesus tells us straight out that we must be reconciled with our brothers and sister; that is, we need to have dealt with our anger and have tried to find a way to make peace—before we can come to the Table of the Lord to share in the bread and the cup. Now I realize that as Protestants we may gloss over or even miss entirely this demand to be reconciled before we come to the Table. But let me remind you that our liturgy for the Great Thanksgiving begins with these words: “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.” Despite the fact that we as Methodists go out of our way to explain that all are welcome at the Table, the truth is, not all are welcome. Specifically, those persons who have not earnestly repented of their sin and/or not seeking to live in peace with others are not welcome. That is to say, those who are holding on to anger, resentment, and ill-will toward others are decidedly not prepared to join Christ and their brothers and sisters around the Table.

Jesus says, “You’ve heard it said... ‘You shall not murder,’ but I say to you, work on your anger and find a way to make peace even with your worst enemy.” This is what transforms the world.

The next thing Jesus asks us to confront is the nature of our relationships. This time we have two pressing issues: adultery and divorce. Again, Jesus is not pointing to the laws themselves around the actions of adultery and divorce—but

rather to one's motivations, one's heart, and one's thoughts. Jesus' words here, although explicitly directed at the marriage relationship, could be expanded to help us consider not just how we act toward other people, but what is inside each one of us, in terms of how we think about other people. We are the keepers of our brothers and sisters, after all.

When Jesus was speaking to his male followers, he told them they didn't have the right to divorce their wives. Here is why: Jesus was about protecting the rights of women. In the kind of Middle Eastern society that existed then—and still does in many parts of that geographical area today (Saudi Arabia is an example that comes to mind)—women, in general, have few rights. Their very survival was dependent upon their husbands and his extended family. But men could, and still can today, quickly divorce their wives by pronouncing three times the equivalent of this phrase “I divorce you.” By this act, the wife is sent out, homeless, helpless, disgraced and generally without any financial resources. Her family of origin will rarely take her back. It's a death sentence for most.

So when Jesus says, “No more of this,” he was saying effectively, “You will not treat women this way any longer.”

As divorced persons who fall in love again and wish to marry, we want to keep our walk with God faithful and obedient. Are we forever marked as “unacceptable” or “well, you are OK as long as you stay single and lonely the rest of your life?”

To answer this, let's look at the full expression of renewed hope given by Jesus at the moment of his greatest agony: “Father, forgive them.” Then there are these beautiful words written by the Apostle Paul in his treatise to the Roman Church: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.”

Reconciliation with God is not ours because we ask for it or because we deserve it. It is ours because that is the very nature of God whose core is love. God seeks wholeness and health, the fuller meaning of the word “salvation,” for every human being. We are indeed God’s beloved children covered wholly by grace, able to experience the new mercies of God given daily. Shall we call it the “grand do-over”?

When George and I met, we were both divorced and lonely. He and I both belonged to a different square dance club for singles and we met at a dance at his club, the Rocky Tops. We dated for a while, became engaged at Christmas 1988, and married in June of 1989. I believe that God blessed me with this union, with this man who was so loving and caring and a faithful disciple of his. Our lives together have been so wonderful as we have journeyed through the joys & sorrows as husband and wife. He has been so supportive of my vocations—first as a teacher and now as a local pastor with the United Methodist Church. He is my rock and the love of my life.

Several years ago at Christmas I gave him a plaque for his office that said, “If I had my life to do over again, I’d find you sooner so I could love you longer.” So I would say to you that if, in this world of grace, you should also be so fortunate as to find another partner, one to whom you can pledge your life and receive that pledge in return, then give a joyful “Yes, thank You” to God and accept this gift of love again.

The final category Jesus asks us to consider is that of what I am calling dishonesty, although Jesus speaks of oaths. An oath is a ritual action of swearing to honor a promise made to another person. When we swear falsely, that means we have failed to uphold our end of the bargain. In essence, we have lied in our

promise by failing to deliver on it. Unfortunately, we are living in a time when honesty and truth-telling are no longer the norm. 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 person's word is no longer assumed to be his honor.

Again, Jesus is speaking of the breaking of an agreement, but this is an issue of character. If we are not honest ourselves, how can we expect others to be honest with us? What Jesus is saying to his followers and to us is that we need to think about our character by concentrating on our roots. Discipleship is less a matter of what we do as it is a matter of who we are. We need to pay close attention to what is on the inside, on our thoughts and our feelings, on what is deep inside our hearts. Once we do this, and if we do this, that those other dishonorable and harmful acts will take care of themselves.

The good news is God knows we can't do this perfectly. We can try, and we can pray, and we can work on healing our anger through reconciliation, and we can work on our relationships by doing unto others as we would have them do unto us, and we can work on honoring our commitments. We can work on our spiritual selves. But we will surely be working on it for all our lives and continuing to make mistakes. But we don't need to worry! This is not the end of us, as John Wesley put it, we are going on to perfection when our righteousness will be abounding, exceeding even that of the scribes and the Pharisees. And in the meantime, there is grace enough to carry us along, despite our human failure.

Following Jesus was never supposed to be about a bad church sign. It's supposed to be about God picking up the pieces of our shattered lives and forming them into something new and wonderful. With his help, may it be so for you!! Amen and amen.