

Sermon Matthew 5:21-37

WHERE WILL YOU PLACE YOUR COMMA TODAY?

This morning we are invited to think about anger, lust, adultery and divorce and if I'm honest I didn't spend last week at the Bishop's Spiritual Retreat, relishing the thought of us having to grapple with it. But, here we are, The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5 and Jesus is conveying hard words about the damage we cause to others through anger and the abuse of special relationships.

The harm we cause to ourselves and others when we crave for things we can't have or compromise special trusts.

The commitments we make, then break in our daily lives.

Jesus teaching challenges, the Rabbi's and the people of Israel on their rigid and narrow interpretations of the ancient Jewish laws of Moses.

They are stuck in the past.

And sometimes we are too.

Paul, in our reading from 1 Corinthians, challenges in much the same way. He tells the Corinthians they are stuck in the past.

Their behaviour, determined by their unforgiving and uncharitable ways, *'Behaving according to human inclinations, he says.'*

They have failed to realize how the Gospel of the Cross has brought in a new way of defining and pursuing a forgiving and loving life in Christ.

Paul urges the Corinthians to change their thinking and their actions.

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I read a story recently about Alexander the third, the tsar of Russia from 1881-1894. He was known as a harsh person who would abuse others with his thinking and actions. His rule was marked by autocratic leadership and repression, and in particular, by his persecution of the Jews.

His wife, Maria, provided a stark contrast, being known especially for her generosity to those in need.

On one occasion, it is said, her husband had signed an order consigning a prisoner to life in exile. The order simply read, Pardon impossible, ---- to be condemned and sent to Siberia. Maria changed that prisoner's life by simply moving a comma.

She altered the order and changed the meaning to **Pardon**, ----- impossible to condemn to Siberia.

A small action that had a huge impact for one human being.

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In Matthew 5 Jesus teaches the meaning of his beatitudes which is the beginning of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. A proclamation of God's loving kingdom and the moral compass for Christian discipleship.

In Christ, God has changed and moved the comma that stood against us to the good news of salvation. Christ's sacrificial saving act for humanity;

One action with a huge impact for us all.

Pardon, ---- impossible to condemn.

New thinking, new disciples, a new focus from Jesus, a new covenant promise.

Every day examples in our reading make his point;

Anger, derision, lust, arrogance, divorce and mistrust.....

The Gospel of Matthew has been described as the swinging door that connects the Old testament reader to the New. Jesus in his teaching calls us to a new life in God and gifts us freedom to choose a new broader way of thinking about the Jewish laws of Moses.

He uses examples in every-day life as a grounding to build his case to move thinking and actions towards righteousness. He intensifies and radicalizes those familiar laws from the Old Testament for those who listen and extends their purpose into every facet of their lives.

In the very first line of our reading Jesus takes his readers far beyond traditional teachings of the Torah:

He says, *'You have heard it said, ... But I say to you, ...'*

Murder is a failure to control anger or hatred and a failure to value life. A murderous heart, he tells them, carries the same motive as the act of killing itself.

Not all anger is bad though. Jesus gets angry, you do and so do I. In chapter 21 Jesus is angry with the money changers in the temple and drives out all who are buying and selling animals and goods.

Sometimes anger has very real and positive purposes. But Jesus is not referring to anger like this. He is referring to anger that is driven by self-interest. The kind of anger that creates real suffering for others.

Adultery likewise; *'You have heard it said, but I say to you.'* Jesus again deepens the interpretation. Adultery is first committed in the heart, through a gaze, in the mind. The woman, the man, already violated.

A partnership, a marriage threatened, sinned against before the act.

Divorce; The same; Pain and betrayal for someone.

Your very word, your very thoughts Jesus teaches should be that of truthfulness and integrity. Constantly striving for godliness in all things.

Jesus is though not a new Moses receiving a law from God. He is issuing interpretations of that law with the authority of God. He deepens the meaning and broadens it. He opens the door to new understanding.

He looks behind the acts to the roots of what causes the action. And, each action in turn is condemned as is the betrayal that lies deep inside a person.

Sort it out Jesus is teaching. Make peace with one another.

Jesus calls us to a new life in God and gifts us freedom to choose A new broader way of thinking about the laws of Moses.

And at the heart of his teaching in Matthew 5 is the concern about the damage we cause through our anger, our abuse of others and the harm we cause when we stand on the moral high ground of what we consider (you and me) to be right and wrong.

And today? We can of course pat ourselves on the back for not committing adultery, but we might be creating a principle relationship with our work, a sport or the internet, instead of our partner or spouse.

We may not commit murder or stab someone literally in the back but we might ruin someone's efforts or reputation through our words.

We might not abuse someone openly, but we might damage someone with a suggestion that they are not up to a job, when we know really that it's more to do with our own inner struggle than the other person's very real God given gifts, skills and abilities.

We can be like Alexander the Third or the Rabbi's and people of Israel and remain stuck in the past with unforgiving and uncharitable thinking within our hearts.

Or, we can choose to be more like Maria who's forgiving and charitable thinking and actions changed a prisoner's life by simply moving a comma.

We can choose to accept Jesus' new covenant promise, accept that saving act of salvation in Christ and move away from the human inclination to unforgiving and uncharitable ways. Jesus says, sort it out. Make peace with one another.

Are we then truly hearing and understanding the message of Jesus and the need for a right relationship with God? Or are we still stuck in the past?

Are we moving that comma and ushering in Christ's new deeper way of thinking, opening the door from the Old to the New and striving for forgiveness and reconciliation as part of our every- day life.

The question is,

Where do you place your comma?

Amen