“Choose life”

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Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Matthew 5:21-37

***Deuteronomy 30:11-20***

***11“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. 12It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ 13Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ 14No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.***

***15“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”***

***Matthew 5:21-37***

***21“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.***

***27“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.***

***31“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.***

***33“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 34******But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.******37Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.***

If we were to read about 10 more lines from the Matthew text that Bonnie read for us today, we would have continued hearing Jesus’ pattern of teaching using the phrase: “You have heard it said……” followed by “…but I say to you…” In all, there are a total of six of these vignettes, three of which are part of today’s text, where Jesus takes on a current law and speaks about how to add another layer of meaning in each of these cases.

When you and I hear the word “but” used we tend to think that what is coming next is going to be something other than what we expected. If not the opposite, at least in another direction. “I’m sorry I yelled, but…” “I’m sorry I was late, but…” “I know we planned on going out, but…” In the case of the teaching Jesus was doing in today’s text, Jesus is using a common rabbinic teaching tool meant to deepen the meaning, widen the scope, and expand the reach of the law.

I want to highlight some of the ways scholars have been able to shed light on what Jesus meant when he said, “But I tell you….”

One commentator, Anna Case-Winters says that the Sermon on the Mount is a call to behave as if the central **command to love as God loves us, undergirds everything else**. She says Jesus calls us to a higher righteousness. Follow the law, and then some. With this in mind, she invites us to hear Jesus saying that it’s not enough just to *not* murder someone – undergirded with love, we should also think of the other ways that we harm people, and seek to mend those relationships. Love goes further than not murdering.

Commentator Melanie Howard reads Jesus’ expansion of the meaning of these laws as if they are undergirded by the **trust required to be in relationship**. She tells us, “In each example that Jesus provides, Jesus notes the minimal requirement of the law before articulating an ethic that *exceeds that most basic* obligation. In each case, this ethic appears to be informed by the values of trust and compassion within community.”2 Howard explains for example that the law about divorce was a topic of great controversy in Jesus’ time. There were two particular rabbinic views on the subject. Of course they didn’t have anything to do with any rights for the woman. The controversy surrounded in which cases did a man have the right to ask for a divorce. One teaching said a man could ask for a divorce with anything trivial as grounds for the divorce. The other was much stricter and only permitted divorce in the most extreme cases. While the topic of divorce in our day, is much different, Howard’s explanation of Jesus’ words is that “In this case, by encouraging the continuity of marriage (except in those cases where trust has already been broken through infidelity).”

A third commentator, Debie Thomas, offers yet another lens through which to view Jesus’ expanded explanation of some of the laws. For Thomas it is important to **lose the view that God is transactional.** “A version in which God and I negotiate like traders on Wall Street: piety for protection.  Good deeds for comfort.  Long prayers for a long life.”3 For her she says, “I understand intellectually that God is not a rule-obsessed tyrant, waiting to zap me if I make a mistake.” For Thomas, reading Jesus’ words less from an individual point of view and instead see Jesus’ words as an invitation to develop an entirely new community. A community that understands that “God [who] cares profoundly about human dignity.  [A] God [who] takes our relationships with each other very seriously, and wants us to treat each other — not with a bare minimum of civility and morality — but with the deepest respect, integrity, and love.” “One where people trust each other.” Jesus said, “***But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.” “37Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’”*** Thomas writes, “*Imagine,* Jesus is suggesting, a community in which the default assumption is that people tell each other the truth.   People keep their promises. People don’t deceive one another.  In such a community, no one needs to say, “I swear!” in order to earn trust.”3

Each of these three commentators uses a different lens through which to make each of the laws Jesus discusses, apply to a wider audience and fit a more global circumstance. One uses the **golden rule** to underlay each of the laws and thus widen the meaning. Another uses the concept of **trust within a community** as foundational to making each law fit a wider audience than it might seem at first glance. And the third approach interprets Jesus’ expansion of each law to be offering the making of a beloved community **based on human dignity and integrity** that God wants for us and between us.

When Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law we can trust his words. Jesus has not replaced an old law with something better. Jesus wasn’t starting over. Jesus was continuing the tradition that he was already a part of. By expanding the reach of each law, Jesus is following the hope of Deuteronomy 30 that asks us to choose life. Choosing life is more than just following the commandments with our actions, but following the commandments even in our hearts. Choosing life is more than making decisions as individuals but making decisions that offer life to the other.

Making good choices requires more than just knowledge and obedience but self-examination and inner honesty and integrity. This is the kind of self-reflection we might associate with Lent, coming up in just two weeks. Epiphany is not the only season that is preparation for a season of preparation. Epiphany moves from celebrating the light of the world that is Jesus, to showing us that our calling as followers of Jesus is to be that light. The text today is just one way Jesus takes the tradition that everyone knows and loves and doesn’t destroy it; doesn’t replace it; but turns it on its head by expanding it. ‘ Start where you are, with the laws you know, and now look at them through this lens. Now I’ll show you how God’s love for you will help you be creators of a new community.’

Our call is to reflect on what is important to our faith, what is central to our faith, and then practice expanding those things to include others. Expand our actions to include what is best for others. Expand our actions to include movement toward justice, toward humility; to include a realization and constant awareness and feeling of awe that God’s grace came first. God’s grace is already here with us and in us, so that we are completely capable of being the light to the world that followers of Jesus would like to be.

And yet, if today you are someone without any light, if you are in darkness, it’s important that you let someone be a light to you. Let someone into your darkness to invite the possibility of hope. Sometimes these messages of good news make it sound like if you’re not constantly giving, constantly shining your light, you have failed as a follower of Christ. We have let God down. We are complex people. We live lives sometimes closer to our best selves and sometimes no where near. The rhythms of our lives take us on so many ups and downs, sometimes it’s hard to imagine ever being in the position to be a blessing to someone else. That’s why it’s important to emphasize that Jesus’ teachings are about how to be in community. Because when one of us can’t choose life, maybe even literally, someone else is there to choose life for us until we can ourselves. Maybe you need some light to shine on you today. Maybe one of us can be that light today.

The laws of God are wide and deep and reach far enough so that all of who we are has a place. If you need light we are here. If you are light, shine on.

Let us pray.

1Case-Winters, Anna. Matthew, p.81

**2**Working Preacher commentary: Melanie A. Howard, Associate Professor and Program Director of Biblical and Theological Studies, Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, California

3<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2525-but-i-say-to-you>