

February 12, 2023

ALL ARE INVOLVED! ALL ARE CONSUMED!

Matthew 5:21-37

Our Gospel reading today is part of what is called “Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It is the longest continuous discourse of Jesus found in the New Testament, occupying three chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. I imagine it must have taken quite a long time to deliver.

The portion of that sermon/discourse that was read today from Matthew 5, covers quite a lot of heavy stuff – murder, reconciliation, settling with your accuser, adultery, self-restraint, marriage and divorce, swearing an oath and being a person of your word.

You likely would have heard the expression: “one cannot see the forest for the trees,” meaning that a person cannot see the big picture because their focus is too much on the details. I believe that in this portion of his sermon, Jesus wants us to see the forest that is our lives – the big picture, because whatever may be the issue that we run up against in life; be it murder, reconciliation, settling with our accuser, adultery, self-restraint, marriage, divorce, whatever; the big picture is: What does it mean for our relationships?

What does it mean for our relationships when things are done, or words are spoken in uncontrollable anger? What harm does that cause? What does it mean for our relationships when greed causes us to covet that which belongs to another? When we diminish and objectify others and treat them as commodities to be possessed or exploited for our benefit and pleasure. What harm does that cause?

What does it mean for our relationships when we cannot be taken at our word? When we cannot be trusted. What harm does that cause?

I don’t think that by mentioning the specific wrongful acts that he did, Jesus intends to single out those as the absolute worst things that people can do, and that those who do such things are the most horrible people, worthy of condemnation.

What I believe Jesus wants us to be aware of is that when it comes to harmful things that are done to others, and the consequences that flow from those actions, none of us escapes untainted and unaffected – “All are involved, and all are consumed”.

People do horrible things to one another, and when you hear of some of the terrible things that people do, you may be shocked, appalled and outraged - and rightly so. (E.g. Man who, last Wednesday, drove a City bus into a daycare in Montreal, killing two and injuring six) And you know why you may react that way? It is because you cannot see yourself doing such things, so it is difficult for you to understand why anyone would, except those who are very sick or deeply depraved.

But while we may be justifiably appalled and outraged at what some people do, if we were to look deep enough within ourselves, we would quite likely also find a note of self-congratulation – unuttered, but present. We would likely hear that voice within us saying: “I thank God I am not like those terrible people; I would never do such a thing.

Maybe not, but Jesus is saying to us: Hold a minute, don’t separate yourself too quickly. You may not have it in you to just kill someone without justification, but aren’t you killing that relationship with your sister or your neighbour; aren’t you wounding your brother or your friend, when in anger you say things about them that are wrong and hurtful? And when you do that, how different are you from the one who commits murder?

You may never have selfishly and wrongfully taken that which belonged to another, but if you entertain an unhealthy and unrestrained desire for that which belongs to someone else, is that not just as wrong?

Jesus seems to be saying that when it comes to wrongs done, whether it is manifested in actions or words, or it just resides in our thoughts, we are all equally guilty. That’s a tough pill to swallow. And it does seem unfair to lump everyone together, doesn’t it?

When I read this portion of Jesus’ sermon, the question that keeps popping up in my head is: Why would Jesus feel the need to paint everyone with such a larger brush? Is it his intention to make us all feel guilty? To make us walk around with our heads hung in shame because we are no different from those whom we would readily and sometimes rightly criticize and call out?

Is there any good news for any of us in all of this?

Scott Hoezee, Director of “The Center for Excellence in Preaching” at Calvin Theological Seminary, reminds us that the Law of God was meant to foster human flourishing at every level, including at the deepest levels of our hearts and minds.

God wants us to respect each other, to love each other, to see God's image residing deep within one another. It's about how we see others and treat others; not just by what we do outwardly, but even more, how we hold them in our hearts.

Looking back at this portion of Jesus' sermon, Jesus really does nail every last one of us, doesn't he? (Reminds me of the story of the woman caught in adultery. John 8: 1-11). But Jesus is not just being tough on us, he wants us to see the larger picture of how we live in relationship with one another. He is reminding us of a truth that is actually very encouraging: that God created us to flourish in God's good creation, and we don't do so by ourselves; we need each other. God wants *all of us* to flourish, but that will not happen if we continue to diminish and destroy one another, for when it comes to things that are wrong and harmful, in one way or another, all are involved, and all are consumed.

And so in this sermon, Jesus is not passing judgement; he is issuing a corrective. It is not always obvious to us just how easily and regularly we undercut the flourishing of others and ourselves. Jesus helps us to see that, and like a gentle surgeon, he cuts open the wounds that infest and inhibit our relationships, lets the toxins – the harmful stuff, seep out and open the way toward healing and reconciliation.

Jesus calls us to humility and to the honouring of others, in word, thought and deed, so that we all together, can flourish as God intends. And that's the good news.

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