

Epiphany 6—February 12, 2023

Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

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

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ ³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We are just a few days away from the secular holiday of St. Valentine’s Day. If you've been in the stores, you've seen a lot of hearts. Heart-shaped boxes. Heart-shaped candies. Teddy bears holding hearts. Maybe you've even seen Cupid aiming his arrow at a heart. Some people make elaborate plans for this celebration, perhaps proclaim their love for another, or perhaps trying to make themselves attractive to another person. Through his Sermon on the Mount Jesus addresses a valentine for each of us. He shows us why we are not at all attractive to him. But Holy Scripture proclaims his love for us and shows us how we can be attractive to him.

Listen to Jesus as he says today: **Be My Valentine!** He shows us that what is impossible, He lovingly arranges.

In the final verse of last week’s portion of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: **“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not**

enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The Pharisees and teachers of the law were considered the best people of their day. And they had a kind of righteousness. You see, righteousness means to measure up to what the law says, meeting its requirements. In short, it's to be right in the sight of the law. And the Pharisees were righteous according to their own interpretation of the law. In these 17 verses Jesus points out the flaw in their thinking and shows us how impossible it is for us to be attractive to Jesus because no matter how hard we try our righteousness is not enough to meet his standards.

Jesus begins this section of his sermon with a phrase that will be used for the rest of this chapter and into the next. Note carefully the parallel words: "You have heard ... but I tell you." This special form is used again in verses 28, 32, 34, 39, and 44. Jesus has an important purpose to accomplish with his carefully chosen words. He is pointing out that there is an assumption being made about God's law. It is an assumption held by the people, but certainly fully believed by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. The assumption deals with the keeping of the law, the fulfilling of God's demands. This assumption was the one that the disciples had often heard from these very teachers and Pharisees. It was the accepted teaching of the time. But now, Jesus was going to fill them in on the truth, God's truth, which was far different from the accepted thought of the people and the scribes and Pharisees. In order to do this, Jesus points out the contrasts in several commandments between the accepted teaching ("you have heard") and the truth ("but I tell you"). He first uses the Fifth Commandment.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' **²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.**

The number of people who are actual murderers is tiny, but Jesus shows us how quickly and easily we break the Fifth Commandment. What kind of thoughts have you had toward someone who has taken advantage of you? toward those who have a different political persuasion than you? toward the neighbor whose dog prefers to use your lawn rather than his own? toward the person who stole your girlfriend or boyfriend? toward your brother or sister when they use the toys you want to play with? toward the boss who always seems to favor your co-worker over you? Do I need to go on? Our righteousness in respect to the Fifth Commandment is severely lacking. How could Jesus ever say: Be My Valentine!?

After the Fifth Commandment Jesus moves on to the Sixth. Jesus says: **²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'** **²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

Again he shows us that his expectations deal not only with outward actions but with the mouth and the heart as well. The Sixth Commandment applies not only to married people but to everyone, to every age and both sexes. Our righteousness, our attractiveness to Jesus, fails with every thought and glance of lust. The ultra-promiscuous times in which we live so easily deaden our desire to obey God's will that our adulterous thoughts so easily seem to be OK. How dare we think that through the Sixth Commandment we are attractive to Jesus!

Jesus isn't finished yet, is he? He now directs us to the Second Commandment by teaching: **³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'** **³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;** **³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great**

King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Jesus reminds us that swearing in unimportant matters destroys an attractiveness we might have to him. We should not that sometimes it is appropriate to swear. Jesus himself swore when the high priest put him under oath. Confirmands take an oath when they promise to use God's Word and live according to it for the rest of their lives. When we chose ne leaders for our congregation they swear that they will serve God and congregation to the best of their ability. First responders and military personnel make oaths when they begin their work.

But in our everyday lives, Jesus tells us that swearing is not necessary and when we do it makes us unattractive to him. He says that if we are always honest, if we always tell the truth searing won't be necessary because people will know our reputation of being honest. And yet it is easy to say, "I swear" or "So help me God!"

Why would Jesus ever say, "Be My Valentine!"

Despite our unattractiveness to Jesus he still says exactly that because what is impossible he livingly arranges. **Listen to him: Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)** With these words Jesus reveals his great love for us. It isn't because of our righteousness, but because of his mercy. Could there ever be a better valentine than Jesus with his perfect life and his sacrificial suffering and death. Peer into that empty tomb and see this most precious valentine – Jesus our Savior, victorious over sin, Satan, and death!

In his first epistle John echoes the words of Jesus: **This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. (1 John 3:16a).**

When we give a valentine we expect some sort of a response, don't we? A thank you? A hug? A Kiss? For married couples maybe more? So as we recognize what a wonderful invitation Jesus gives us when he asks us to be his valentine, we certainly will think about how we respond. The complete though in the epistle of John that I just referenced is this: This is how we know what love is: **Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. (1 John 3:16).** We can reflect Jesus' valentine invitation by how we treat others.

We can use the fifth, sixth and second commandments as our guide in our daily lives and in this way reflect Jesus valentine invitation and show others that his valentine is not exclusive, but is intended for all people.

St. Paul says exactly that as he wrote to the Christians in Galatia: **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)**

To the Ephesians he wrote: **Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)**

I hope that each of you receives some special valentines on Tuesday. I pray that you will always remember that what is impossible, Jesus lovingly arranges and now invites us by saying **Be My Valentine!**

Amen.

Pastor Joel Jaeger