

Sunday February 12, 2023  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
Matthew 5:33-37  
There Ought to be a Law

We look at our world and it seems that we are not law-abiding people. Drive-by shootings, unhoused children living on the streets, bullying in the schools. Brutalities too gruesome to mention perpetrated one human being on another. There ought to be a law. Truth is there have always been laws. Scripture is chock full of them, even before Moses descended from Sinai, the glow of the Lord on his face and the tablets in hand, there were laws. The Book of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible says, "Of every tree in the garden you may eat freely, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." Laws, before the end of the second chapter of Genesis there are laws. Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus all contain laws. It's no wonder then, The Sermon on the Mount has its section on the law, too. Jesus hands out blessings to the oppressed, lays out the mandate for faithful disciples, and then in the midst of his captive audience he lays down the law. Jesus says, "I've come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." He lays down some heavy-duty mandates. On first reading, they may appear simple. A second reading however cuts us to our core, for we know that in some way we have broken the law. It is as if Jesus is creating the way for us to avoid sinning by proclaiming this amplified version of the law. It is like he is outlining behaviors for us that indicate we are on the road to ruin before it is too late. There is so much in this text, this morning we will focus only on verses 33-37. But I encourage you to read for yourself Jesus' amplification of the law. Listen for the word of God. (Scripture is read.)

In first century Palestine, the air was filled with oaths. "I swear by Jerusalem." "I swear by heaven." Oaths echoed everywhere, deals were made or products bartered. We still hear oaths today in our world. "I swear to God." "I kid you not." "It's the gospel

truth!" In the midst of all this kind of oath taking Jesus speaks. "Don't swear at all," the Lord Jesus Christ says.

Let's be clear about Jesus' topic. Parents, you cannot use this passage as an admonition against cuss words. No. If Jesus' father hit his thumb with a hammer doing carpentry, the air in Nazareth probably turned blue. The command is not aimed at bad language. The question with bad language is, not what's said, but why. Governor Gretchen Witmer's mantra echoes through her term in office, "Fix the damn roads!" Many a person has probably replied, "Hell, yes," every time a rim was bent or a tire punctured on a pothole. Do we reproach the Governor? No. We can regret cuss words. We can condemn their use as rude and inappropriate. And in particular avoid the use of God and Jesus at all except, in prayer and worship. But the truth is, when Jesus says, "Don't swear at all," he is not nailing up a ban against bad language.

So, what is Jesus saying? Jesus is speaking to the world, our world. We live in the world of the big lie. The woman said to her friend "you never told me my ex was invited to the party" the reply "well you never asked." Words are used deceitfully. Would we need a truth in lending bill if there were not widespread untruth in lending? Or would the FDA curb food and pseudo-medical product advertising claims if claims were not frequently untrue? As investigations happen in cities around the nation and at all levels of government is there anyone who believes they heard the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? As people we are truth averse. The time in which we are living has invited us to revisit our history as people that have marginalized, misrepresented, and disadvantaged persons differing. That big lie has had painful consequences with regard to healthcare, housing, education, faith, the wellbeing of families and communities, politics, business, marriages, even churches. Our world is built on falsity.

Well, no wonder we swear by oaths. In a world of falsity, we have to do something to underline truth. "I swear to God!" we say. Or "Look you can trust me!" No wonder that in court rooms we administer oaths, swearing on a Bible to tell the truth. All our oath taking is an admission that telling the truth is not our normal way of life.

See, when we speak by oaths, we are trying to set up a sacred moment of truth, in a world of secular, all too human, falsity. Someone suggested in response to the question, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" we should answer in the words of the general confession "There is no truth in us." Fact is our swearing to the truth is a confession of our original sin.

So. what's the answer? A whole new world. If all language is designed for self-protection and deceiving neighbors, then it will be of no avail to demand truthfulness. What we need is a whole new world to live in; a kingdom of God perhaps. Listen, if we live before God full time and in affection toward neighbors, truth would be our way of life. It has been said, "If we live in love, we can speak true to one another." what Jesus is offering in this passage is a whole new social order built on love. This week in the Presbytery of Detroit, there has been a hurling of videos and posts on social media and through formal email communications concerning truth. The content is heated and personalized, yet nothing is said in person. It is unhealthy. Over four years ago, as a presbytery we confessed the many ways our systemic racism is a barrier to Detroit Presbytery it's mission and purpose. Perhaps it is even true for our congregations. When we say we will speak the truth in love it implies we will also listen in love. Speaking truth requires us to lay aside ourselves and our preconceived notions and welcome a vulnerable conversation, that can open a pathway for reconciliation and repair.

This is our call. We church types are called to be truth tellers. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. That's what Jesus says to us. In a big lie world, we are called to show the shape of kingdom life. There will be a price. At one point in my life, I owned a Volkswagen Quantum. I decided to sell it when the odometer reached 150,000 miles. It sat for months on the corner with a sign in the window, for sale. The car never sold. It was a sharp looking car, luxurious actually. The truth is it was expensive to maintain, repair parts were hard to get. The cost of maintenance was more than my budget could bear. I told that truth to everyone who made queries about that car. The car never sold. I ended up trading it in for a fraction of its value. When we tell the truth it can be costly. Not simply to our wallets. Telling the truth could lose us friends. Might label us as unpatriotic. Might make it challenging for us to gain promotions. In Jesus Christ we know the cost of speaking truth. It costs our life. But in view of the cross, we know that speaking truth transformed the trajectory of the world. We are a people chosen by Christ to show and tell what God's new world is all about. As disciples, speaking truth will be our style. No funny business, so help us God! No playing games to deceive or protect. We are to live so that in a broken world, all God's people will be named truthful.

How tall an order is it? Can we live in earnest with ourselves, our families, this church community? Can we own up not only to our joys but our disappointments? Will we be able to concede our screw ups as well as our successes? Can we confess our fears as strangers become friends? It is a tall order. Yet we remember we are surrounded and grounded in our Lord Jesus Christ whose unfailing love can grant us courage and gentleness and peace. So that we can live the truth that will set us free. So we can live within the law of God Almighty.