

Highland Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday after Epiphany – February 12, 2022
“Cultivating Compassion”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Matthew 5:21-37

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

When Nolan and I were planning out the preaching schedule a few months ago we talked about doing a three-part series on Matthew’s version of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. I thought this sounded like a great idea at the time, forgetting the fact that Matthew’s sermon digresses into what is now known as the “Antitheses” – what we just heard read by Dorissa. I also forgot that we were having to switch up the preaching schedule so that this passage fell on my week. So. Here we are. Let’s talk about murder and divorce!

Jesus is using a rhetorical technique in his sermon of starting at a point that every audience member can agree on and then slowly bringing them along with him to the points that are more controversial. By starting with an example at which most hearers would not likely take offense, Jesus paves the way for his audience to follow him through a progression of increasingly smaller infractions against others within one’s community. So, the passage begins with the most egregious example of severed trust in a community: the ending of another human’s life with murder. In each example that Jesus provides, Jesus notes the minimal requirement of the law before articulating his own ethic that exceeds these most basic obligations. “You have heard it said, ‘whoever murders shall be liable for judgment,’ but I say, ‘if you are angry or insult your sibling you will be liable for judgment.’”

Each of Jesus’s individual teachings here can be understood under a larger paradigm of upholding trust and compassion within human community. In each case, Jesus’s ethics that go above and beyond the law appear to be informed by these values of trust and compassion. Jesus is not saying throw out society’s laws. These passages and the ones before it show that he has the highest praise for the Mosaic law. But he is saying that we should actually hold one another to a higher standard and uplift the care of the individual over the law.

After speaking on murder, Jesus moves onto the topics of adultery and divorce. It’s important for us to recognize that the topic of divorce was a particularly fraught one in Jesus’ time. Two of the leading teachers of Jesus’ time, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, were famously divided over the issue of divorce. The school of Hillel favored a more permissive approach to divorce that allowed for it even for something such as a wife ruining her husband’s meal. The school of Shammai, however, upheld a much stricter view that only permitted divorce in the most extreme cases.

Although there is no exact parallel in modern religious settings for how the issue of divorce functioned for Jesus and his contemporaries, any number of hot button issues today might compare: abortion access, LGBTQIA+ rights, or the church’s position in relation to political issues. Jesus’ response with the topic of divorce can offer a powerful example for Christian communities who are navigating the politically and ideologically charged questions of

our day. Although Jesus does seem to side more closely with one school of thought over another, he ultimately upholds the values of trust and compassion within human community. In this case, by encouraging the continuity of marriage (except in the case where trust has already been broken through infidelity), Jesus underscores the need for trust and compassion within human relations.

Now, believe me, I am not going to stand up here and make a judgment on divorce. It is one of the most painful human experiences and I think if we all had our way, we would not want anyone to have to experience that pain. But there are also a number of ways in which divorce can be incredibly life-giving for many after they do the hard work of getting through the pain. Jesus's ultimate statement here is recognizing the great need to uplift the care for the individual over strict interpretation of the law.

Jesus' teachings on divorce provide a helpful foundation for understanding the final instruction in this passage related to making vows. At first, Jesus' teachings on the proper way to make vows might seem like an odd example of how he is promoting an ethic of trust and compassion within human relationships. However, when set within an ancient context where most dealings occurred orally rather than in writing, one's word would have carried something like the weight of one's signature on an affidavit today. Jesus's suggestion to let one's "yes" be "yes" is essentially an encouragement to ensure that one's spoken word is so authentic and so in line with one's intentions that it is to demonstrate the highest possible level of trustworthiness and integrity. This needed to be true not only in dealings with other humans, but also in dealings with God.

When we put this encouragement of ethics up against our New Testament passage from 1 Corinthians, you can see the continued importance of figuring out how to be in community well. Paul is writing to call out and correct the acts of disunity happening in the home churches, trying to convince them that their ways of living are out of line with Christianity. He calls them spiritual babies, telling them they are not yet ready for solid food. It is another example of the great need to cultivate compassion and trust in communities of faith and unfortunately, the ways that the church has failed from the beginning.

This Thursday was the city-wide book club put together by Empower West. The author of this year's book is Jemar Tisby who was recently hired as a professor of history at Simmons College of Kentucky. Tisby's newest book is titled, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice*. At the city-wide book read lunch event, he started the conversation by asking us to think of five ways that you could fight racism. He gave us time to think about it, write it down, and discuss it in small groups, he asked us to share out loud and there were lots of great answers talking about reforming education, building up HBCUs, doing our own work as white communities. Then we kind of made Dr. Tisby's point for him because he went on to say, "when it comes to fighting racism, we don't have a how-to problem, we have a want-to problem."

Dr. Tisby's new book outlines how to fight racism through an acronym that he calls ARC: the a stands for awareness, the r stands for relationships and the c stands for commitment. He said the easier way to remember that is head, heart, hands. The awareness (head) aspect means that we need to be doing our own work of absorbing knowledge, information, and data that's required to fight racism in all its forms. The relationship (heart) aspect means that our personal, professional, and community networks need to foster cross-racial empathy and solidarity. For us who are white, we must work a lot harder and go out of our way to put ourselves into diverse spaces. That's one of the things we can be doing in this work. The commitment (hands) means that we need to take actions that are necessary to deconstruct laws and policies that create and perpetuate racial inequality and replace them with ones that lead to equity for people of all races and ethnicities.

The good news in these passages today can be found in the last line of 1 Corinthians 3. Verse 9 states that we are co-laborers with God. We are working together; we are God's field and God's building. We are called to rethink the nature of church ministry as a collaborative effort by God and all those who are called to be God's co-laborers. It's not completely up to us. If it were, we would screw it up. Because history shows us time and time again, we screw it up. We got it wrong in the early church when folks were bickering with one another over whose teacher is better, we get it way wrong with racism, we are still getting it wrong when we hurt one another within these walls. But we are not alone. We are co-laborers. We ask forgiveness from God and one another, we acknowledge that we get it wrong, we rely on so much grace, and then we try again.

Dr. Tisby said that the difference between a dream and a goal is a plan. What is our plan for cultivating compassion in our community and specifically around our siblings of color? Compassion starts within yourself but needs to radiate out to all those you meet so that the true kingdom of God can be a reality right here. We can start right here with ourselves - become more self-aware of our own issues and what is standing in the way of us really seeing the needs of those around us. We can start by building stronger relationships within these walls and then letting it radiate out and overflow. We can make the commitment to do the hard work. Cultivating compassion and trust with one another is going to require lots of grace as we recognize that we do this work as co-laborers with God, listening and paying attention to the movement of the spirit. But every action that we take, no matter how small, gets us closer to the community that we want to be. May we all work to make it so. Amen.