**Sermon for 2/12/2023 Matthew 5:21-37 “Everything Needs Updating”**

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But 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. So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come 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. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If 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. And 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.

“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.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

I bet that most of you are like me; we have a love/hate relationship with technology. We are hesitant to learn new applications; resistant to change of brands or programs; and confused by the sheer volume of ‘improvements’ that evidently must be continually made, improvements that confuse and sometimes upset us. What we struggle to ignore is that the modern tech industry is very much modeled on God’s creation: continual innovation and updating is the very definition of Life! I managed to burn quite a few skin cells beyond repair while Christina and I were romping around in Mexico, but I am not worried, because God has enrolled my skin in the automatic update protocol. New skin has already grown beneath the damaged skin, and just awaits a good buffing to show itself to the world. As I understand it, every cell in our bodies is perpetually updated, so long as we live. Seasons come and seasons go, nature takes a walloping from pollution and drought and myriad negative influences, but it will not be subsumed, the process of updating and growing is perpetual, in all things, whether we are comfortable with it or not.

Which is why it has always seemed strange to me, this notion that God never changes. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shalt be…how can that be true, that the Author of all this continual updating in nature and in our very bodies would be static and unchanging? And evidently for some believers, this trait would also apply to the scriptures, fully and perfectly formed for all time and needing no modification. Hmmm.

I am going on about this because in today’s section of the Sermon on the Mount, no less an authority than Jesus is found updating the holy writ. Again and again we will hear him say, you have been taught thus, but that learning needs to be expanded and updated. And he does all of this bible tinkering using reverse engineering – that is, starting with an outcome and deducing how it came to be that way– and the infamous ‘edge of the wedge’ argument. We’ve all heard of this one, sometimes called the ‘slippery slope’, or my favorite, the [camel's nose](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camel%27s_nose) in the tent…be careful when camping in the Middle East. ‘Cause once the camel’s *nose* is in your tent, it’s just a matter of time till the whole darned camel is in there, too.

What we find here is the Bible’s most famous version of reverse engineering. Jesus begins each teaching with a known law: thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, those kinds of big-ticket laws. And then, having shown us the fat end of the wedge, the negative behavior in which we indulge at our peril, he then backs up, as it were, revealing the *rest* of the wedge, the little, seemingly harmless steps that can lead us all the way to a big fat life-altering problem. He shows us the whole camel, snarling, spitting, stinky and not very well designed for indoors, and then backs it out of the tent, until we see just the little nose, the soft lips, aww, how cute! This is the problem with camel’s noses and edges of wedges, they *seem* innocuous until you see the whole picture. There are three teachings here that Jesus deconstructs and updates in this way, and each has something compelling for us to learn. Ready to go camel riding?

The first challenge he addresses is murder, surely an ultimate and undesirable outcome at any point in history. Thou shalt not murder, the good book says, with no explanation, no rationale, and none needed, really, since killing one another just leads to obvious social problems down the road. So, in place of the unnecessary rationale, Jesus shows us the little, tiny, innocent steps that might take an ordinarily placid person down that terrible road. Anger with each other, insulting each other, calling each other derogatory names, these build up energy inside of us, and could take us right over the edge. His solution is brilliant but not easily done: his solution is continual, vigilant seeking and granting of forgiveness. And our Jesus, never above exaggeration to make a good point, even invents his own edge-of-the-wedge argument about how important this is, the one about the judge and the jailer and the life sentence. He assumes facts not in evidence, assumes that we will be found guilty, assumes we will find no pardon, ever. But underneath this broad stroke is a finely written hand that lists for us the ways, each of them seemingly insignificant, that can take us from merely miffed to maniacally murderous. Anger will lead inevitably to name calling and character assassination, and beyond that, the road is pretty plain. History, in this regard, is also pretty plain; we humans get vexed enough, worked up enough, and we make choices that cannot be unmade. His advice, and it is *great* advice, is that we short-circuit the process. We nip the anger in the bud, rather than letting it grow and put down roots. This seems to be a *vital* update of the original protocol.

I live this out and continue to massage it in my personal life. No, I am not a murderer. But several years ago our Council of Bishops wrote a very moving letter about reducing violence in the world, and showed how this unbridled escalation of anger was being played out to the detriment of the whole human race. I was not a terribly violent person, but I did have a pretty risky habit: I was a sarcastic little snot, much more so than now. And I can remember, with pain, seeing my wittiness for what it truly was, violence cloaked in humor, and realizing that my jests and barbs could create pain and unease in others, and that they might take it further. I had to *own* that I was a key player in the escalation of unease in my relationships. I took Jesus’ advice, took it down a few notches, pulled the plug on snappy comebacks that garnered laughs but also built resentment. I am not as sarcastic as I used to be, because the price of that kind of funniness was just too dear.

The second teaching has to do with adultery. Jesus doesn’t elaborate here, but I want to make sure we understand and define this offensive choice in the same way. In my pastor’s heart, adultery is not just about sex; sex is the symptom, but not the disease itself. The disease itself is the violation of the fragile, hard-to-rebuild trust between the partners. It is the violation of this covenant, this promise, between persons, that is the real issue. Sex may be the car we are driving when we have the crash, but it is the crash that is the problem, you see? I build this opinion from life experience, and reading and study, yada yada yada, but more from Jesus’ own words. Again, he shows us the little, tiny,’ who could it hurt?’ kind of steps that could lead otherwise sane, caring people to break faith with their spouses. He talks about looking upon others with lust, with desire to possess them sexually or romantically. In that sense adultery is a kind of greed; we already have a lover, but we want more. He sets for us all a higher bar; it’s no good, he insists, to be technically faithful but burning with lust for someone else, something else, because that greedy lust will destroy you. The covenant has already been broken, sex or no, in our desire to have what isn’t ours and be taken by one who has no claim to our body or heart. And then, in a grand exaggerating style that I hope even the most literal Bible interpreter would reject, he suggests strong measures, cutting off hands and plucking out eyes if they lead us into lust. Beyond the melodrama, though, he hopes to lead us to a deep understanding of this particular edge of the wedge. Adultery is the end of it, the camel in the tent, but it begins *way before* the illicit horizontal romping. His strong words are *meant* to be the slap in the face that wakes us up, because breaking faith with one another in this way is a hard skid to pull out of. Far better, he would say, to avoid that sharp curve in the first place.

The third and final teaching for today is about truthfulness. If we were going to yoke it to a commandment it would be number nine, thou shalt not bear false witness…in other words, you shouldn’t lie. This taking of vows and oaths is simply the overt version of this practice. In the making of grand pronouncements, we can be writing behavioral checks that we cannot cover, possibly even deliberately bad checks that we have no intention of honoring. How has our world survived the unfaithful promises of the human race? Adultery is one thing; that effects a couple, possibly a family or three, but lying breaks down the social fabric *much* faster. In a biological reality where we are all vulnerable sometimes, we all have to sleep *sometimes*, we need a level of trust between us. You can’t have a society where everybody is afraid of each other, where everybody lives in distrust of the other, and the surest way to create that nightmare is to allow this habit of lying to become common and even expected.

Here is where this sermon could get really political really fast, but we will tread lightly today. When it comes to our elected leadership, some lie less, and some lie more, but all politicians are known to be, or compelled to be dishonest, and therein lies the problem. The leader models the acceptable behavior for the group. The leader sets the standard. You have clergy in your churches, and you rightfully expect that we will be people of sound character and judgement, because we set the standard. So, when there is a pastoral scandal, it hurts the church and it hurts the world, because trust is broken, that fragile, spun glass factor that makes civilization possible. Expand that truth from the little brown church in the vale to the American political system, or our worldwide community, and we must face the national or the global reality that dishonesty makes for a tense and unstable world. And Jesus’ advice, lest we lose it in the verbal fray, is clear and concise. Don’t make promises you can’t keep. In politics, this would considerably reduce the length of the campaign season! Let your yes be yes, and honor it. Let your no be no, and stand by that, too. They say you will never have a dependable Yes unless you have the ability to say a firm No as well. We in the church like to be known as people of the Word…but how much more valuable it would be to be known as people who honor and keep their word.

Jesus’ great sermon continues, but not today. For today, we have chewed enough. And by embracing lives of vigilant forgiveness, avoidance of excess, and offering a clear and dependable word, we draw closer to earning that name, Christian. Today we have met three destructive camels, and hopefully picked up ideas and tools to keep these nosy varmints out of our tents. Amen.