

Jesus says, “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; or if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Do you ever get the impression that Jesus is trying to get our attention, making sure we're listening, even trying to shock us just a little bit into taking notice of what he's saying?

Another translation puts it this way: You have to blind your right eye at the very the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better to live one-eyed, better a bloody stump than your entire being dumped on the moral trash heap for good.

Dang, Jesus. We get it, all right? We're listening, okay? We are still listening.

See, this is now the third week—week three out of four, actually—that our lectionary readings have us listening to, unpacking, and learning from Jesus' first public proclamation according to Matthew, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is still talking, he's still preaching, the same sermon, three weeks on. I mean, most of us start checking our watches whenever a sermon breaks the ten minute mark, but not Jesus: he's still preaching and we're still listening to him three weeks on.

It's the same sermon that started out with such beautiful poetry, such grace-filled images: “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the peacemakers.

Then Jesus moves from the general to the more specific, Blessed are you, and you, and you and you. Blessed are you when you are despised, rejected, and offended for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel. Rejoice and be glad in that day. For you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, you are the city on the hill. And since you are the light of the world, therefore let your light so shine for all to see, so that they may give the glory of God.

But as one commentator has put it, if the words of Jesus we read last week were salted with grace, this week's are peppered with threats. Threats of what might happen if the commandments are not kept. Threats of how the whole community may suffer if the spirit of the law is not upheld. Threats of how our own complacency about following the law only on the most obvious, surface level can keep us from checking our interior motives, the intentions behind our actions, the micro-aggressions we are all capable of that in the end Jesus says are just as sinful as theft, adultery, even murder.

Maybe that's what Jesus wants to be sure we're listening to three weeks into this sermon. Maybe that's why he pivots rather suddenly from words of grace and blessings to words of responsibility and consequence. This time, he's got some tougher words for us to latch onto now, and he wants to make sure we're still with him. That we're still

paying attention, not just to those blessings he begins with, to the grace that sets this whole mountain of a sermon in motion, but also to the harsher realities of life together, to the expectations Jesus lays out for how this beloved community he has called into existence will sustain itself. That having (hopefully) internalized his blessings, his words naming us salt and light, his command us to let that light shine and that salt do its work in the world, that we also heed his warning to follow certain rules, regulations, commandments and guidelines in order that this beloved community continues to be more tightly woven together through intentional, compassionate behavior towards one another and the world around us.

I had a friend and co-worker in Senegal, a brilliant young man named Mahamadou Wane, who despite the fact that he had never been to school, could recite from memory entire rosters of world cup soccer teams going back to the 1950s, could catalog every goal scored at what minute in which match and by whom. He was also a wiz at electronics, able to strip down a radio, a television, even a mobile phone to its component parts in order to find that one little piece of soldered wire, that one tiny transistor, that one micro chip that was causing the unit a problem, in order to fix or replace it. This he did without ever reading a manual, without anyone showing him how to do it, certainly without any certification to be messing with such sophisticated stuff. He could keep extensive lists in his head, which came in handy in his job, since he was in charge of going into town and getting all kinds of supplies for the community center where we both worked. His French was more limited than mine, but we figured out a way to communicate very well despite each of our condensed vocabularies.

But one mistake he continually made was that he always confused the words minimum and maximum. He'd tell me he needed 40,000 francs, maximum, for certain purchases, and would be surprised if I'd give him only 40,000 francs. Or he'd tell me his trip to town would take three hours, minimum, and I'd be surprised to see him back only two hours later. Maybe it was something that didn't quite translate from his native language of Wolof, but it was uncanny—for all the rest of his intellectual brilliance, he *always* said the exact opposite of the word he meant: minimum for maximum and maximum for minimum.

I thought about Mahamadou as I was reflecting on this text, on these words of Jesus this week. That it seems that this is part of what Jesus is saying to his listeners on that mountainside. He seems to be saying that they—and we—may be confusing the minimum requirements of the law with the maximum. That we're looking too closely at the extreme expression of unlawful behaviors instead of checking our own interior attitudes that may be counter to the way Jesus would have his people live. Focusing on the minimum requirements of the law as if they were the maximum can limit the way we see one another, the way we interact with one another, the way we value one another in this beloved community Jesus continues to call into being.

We saw signs of that confusion show themselves in some rather minor or even insignificant ways in the week leading up to our annual meeting. I heard a few people wondering out loud what the minimum requirement was to be considered a voting member of this congregation, and I wondered how much any of us, myself included, took time to wonder about the many and varied ways people choose to live as part of

this community of faith, beyond the minimum requirements for membership, at times even in spite of them. Now, to be sure, none of the people who raised this point to me seemed to think it anything more than a curiosity, something to notice and perhaps even to laugh at. Still, it is part of our human nature to continually be aware of the law's minimum requirements, even if it has become our habit to go way past these bare minimums on a fairly regular basis.

But think that is what Jesus was thinking about when he comes up with this refrain, "You've heard it said to those of ancient times, but I say to you...." He's trying to nudge us from a complacent tendency to only ever do the minimum required to get by *and* to nudge instead toward an impulse, an intentionality, a reflex towards living as God's people in beloved community. Jesus was clear that he did not come to repeal and replace God's Law, but rather to bring that Law to its fulfillment. That fulfillment comes to us in community, and in that community—in that beloved community—it is not enough simply to avoid homicide, we need to move beyond insult, name-calling, and unresolved anger. It is not enough to avoid stealing from one another, we need to look out for one another, protect one another's property, watch out for one another's goods. It is not enough in that we refrain from outright adulterous acts, we need to move way beyond seeing one another as objects and treat one another as equals created in the image of God.

Our calling as the people of God is to continually work out what God's law means for us today, and to do so for the sake of life—for our life in community, as well as for the larger community around us. Deuteronomy reminds us of God's call to choose life, while also reminding us that God's law is not so far away, it's not way up in heaven, nor beyond the sea. In other words, God's law isn't actually that hard to follow, to which we can easily agree, at least if we continue to see it from the surface: don't lie, don't kill, don't steal, don't commit adultery.

But what if the God's law is more than that. What if God's law is actually an invitation to help our neighbor, defend their honor, have faith in their words, protect their property, serve their life. What if the Law is about creating a hospitable place where life can thrive?

You've heard it said to those of ancient times that God's commandments are only and always negative—thou shalt not this, thou shalt not that, but I say to you God's law exists to bring life, to form community, and to orient that community toward their neighbors.

You've heard it said that as long as you steer clear of the big ones—don't kill, don't steal, don't commit adultery, it's all good; but I say to you if you are angry against a sister or brother, if you don't look out for a sister or brother and their livelihoods, if you treat a sister or a brother as an object, you must repent, turn back towards God and God's ways.

You've heard it said to those of ancient times, the church exists primarily for its members, for their needs, for their services, but I say to you the church exists to be light

for the world, salt for the earth, a city on the hill, God's mission outpost for the community.

You've heard it said, a sermon normally lasts about 12 to 15 minutes; but I say to you this Sermon on the Mount is going to end up taking us a full four weeks.

Four weeks, plus a lifetime, then an eternity. Thanks be to God. Amen.