

TEXT: Matthew 5:21-37

THEME: We belong to an indissoluble coinherence of souls

SUBJECT: Personal existence

TITLE: What Is a Person?

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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Messiah Moravian

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These sayings are hard to hear, harder to take seriously. It would be easy to reject them. Until we remember we cannot be persons as isolated individuals. We are persons only in and through a history of relations with others. This is why we dismiss these sayings of Jesus, for whatever reason, to our peril.

For two thousand years interpreters have tempered the strictness of the prohibition against anger. Yet, Matthew knows nothing of a distinction between justified and unjustified anger.

Anger evokes fear; fear generates anger. It is a vicious circle. Anger attempts to intimidate and control others. Through insults and name calling anger denigrates the humanity of others. We are now drowning in a sea of anger and fear and inhumanity.

The command to be reconciled with your brother/sister before offering your gift on the altar would have been particularly onerous to Galileans who traveled several days by foot to get to the Temple in Jerusalem, but not as onerous as murder. The goal of this command is a new basic attitude to fellow human beings. Reconciliation, love, is to take the place of every feeling of anger, the root of human murder.

It is not enough to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters; we must also reconcile with our opponents. It is better to settle out of court than to go to trial and risk jail time.

The admonition against lust assumes only men lust, only women are objects of lust. Maybe because the right to divorce was the prerogative of men. The remedy for lust only impairs dexterity; it doesn't touch desire. If we amputated every "offending" body part, as one commentator wryly noted, most of us would be blind, deaf, and speechless quadriplegics.

Perhaps this is a good time to remember Jesus was a Jewish sage who loved hyperbole. Perhaps we should also admit that Jesus expresses a conviction shared not only in the ancient world but especially in the Judaism of his day: adultery begins in the heart; sin begins in one's thoughts.

With these sayings, Matthew is introducing readers to a radical way of living free of compromise. Matthew assumes a holistic understanding of the person that does not permit a separation between inner and outer, between what is legally punishable and mere thoughts.

Jesus was opposed to divorce. Why? Was it to protect the rights of women who could be dismissed if they burned dinner or no longer pleased the husband? The experience and role of women in society today is a long way from what it was in the first century. Marriage, as a social institution, is not what it was in Jesus day. How different, and what the differences mean, we are still sorting through.

Both Matthew and Paul accept exceptions to the prohibition against divorce. So does the church. Speaking as a pastor who has presided at a few weddings and shared the pain of people going through divorce, I have long argued that it should be much harder to get married and easier to get

divorced. It is harder to get a driver's license than it is a marriage license. In my opinion this is absurd.

Luther didn't believe love needed laws. Love may not need laws but we do. Love, like freedom, flourishes when the good is its aim. If we are honest, we know that even in the best of relationships the good can be sacrificed for the convenient, the expedient. We are masters of rationalization. We need laws that guard the good so we do not accept anything and keep quiet about everything.

This brings us to the prohibition against oaths which every religious tradition, except a couple of sectarian groups, has discarded. Yet, in an age when disinformation (lying) is the coin of the realm, the importance of Jesus' saying cannot be overestimated. Our word is to be unreservedly truthful. There are not two kinds of truth. One's word alone is to be absolutely truthful.

The character of our relationships matter, because we become persons only in relation with one another. In El Salvador many prisoners put in solitary confinement for up to a year never recovered their minds. In the end, we cannot begin or continue to be a person at all except in and by way of other persons. We require others in order to possess all that is necessary for true personal existence for ourselves.

Thomas Merton fought for permission to build a hermitage, to live by himself. His monastic order required years of living in community before considering such a request. Even when permission was granted, the hermit was still required to attend weekly communal events. When Merton finally won his hermitage, he entertained a stream of visitors, including Joan Baez who brought him Bob Dylan records, which he loved. There is only so much solitude we can stand before we go mad.

We are those others who make us. You are a part of every person you are involved with, and all who are involved with you are a part of you. In turn each of those you are involved with are involved with countless others, on and on, without limit. The web of associations that make us who we are, David Bentley Hart writes, never reaches an end.

The most essential law of love is that it must inexorably grow beyond all immediately discernible boundaries in order to be fulfilled. We are a whole history of associations, loves, memories, attachments, and affinities. We are all the others who have made us who we are, and to whom we belong as much as they to us?

Can we begin to see that we dismiss Jesus' sayings to our peril? We can no more avoid the effects of cultural pollution than we can escape the consequences of environmental pollution. Anger, fear, insults, name calling, lust, contentious disputes, lies, make us just as sick as carcinogens. Unhealthy relationships are as threatening to our well being as the coronavirus.

Jesus knows the quality of our relationships matter to the kind of persons we become. Relationships characterized by a calm confidence, trust, respect, honesty, and creative conflict resolution, help us emerge into a fuller existence. Healthy relationships satisfy the deepest hunger of our hearts: to know and to be known.

We belong to each other. Who we are as persons is created by and sustained within the loves and associations and affinities that shape us.