

**Sermon for February 12, 2023 by The Rev. Lydia Gajdel**  
**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany Year A**  
**St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church – Chicago, Illinois**

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In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mother of us all.

I have a gripe. A bone to pick with tradition, if you will. I will be honest with you and tell you that this is not my only biblical grievance. There are many conversations I wish I could have with our religious ancestors, Jesus Christ himself included, but I digress. My gripe is rooted in our gospel.

The gospel according to Matthew chapter 5 verses 21-48 is traditionally referred to as the antithesis. Nestled at the end of the sermon on the mount, these verses are said to place Jewish law against the teachings of Jesus, creating an antithetical or oppositional relationship. I mean, in some ways I get it. We see it in Jesus's framing. "You have heard that it was said... But I say to you that..." This structure repeats itself with each new topic Jesus addresses. One could take from this that Jesus is saying something to the effect of, "You know the old law, but what I'm going to say trumps it."

But that type of black or white, this or that relationship simply doesn't make sense for what we know of Jesus. What Jesus has said to us about who he is and what he is doing. The Jesus Christ who began his ministry by referencing the words of Isaiah and just four verses before our gospel reading for today begins proclaims "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

So, here is my pushback to the generations that have come before us. This section of Matthew's gospel which we read this morning is not so much an antithesis, oppositional in nature, but rather an expansion. A blowing open of what is being asked of us as people of God. An invitation to go beyond the law and a radical

understanding of what being in relationship with God and God's creatures requires of us.

Jesus's rhetoric expands upon Jewish tradition by layering the obligatory nature of the law with an ethic of relationality, designed to impress upon Jesus's audience the importance of trust and compassion as we continue to learn how to do this life together in community. Using this idea as a basis, the way that Jesus structures his argument is really quite brilliant. It is almost like a funnel, starting first with the least divisive topic to hook people as he leads them deeper into his radicalization of the law, each topic getting more controversial as he goes on.

He begins with murder, something that I think we can all get behind as being bad. The law says it's bad. We know it's bad. We are good to go. But not quite, Jesus says. What about anger? What about contempt? Malice of any kind against your neighbor? It is not just that murder is condemned, but that the bricks that line the road to murder are also condemned. Anything that tears apart the fabric of relationships between human beings must be repaired before we come to God. It is not just a black and white don't kill, but also an obligation to care for the health of our relationships and make amends when the need arises.

Jesus next goes one step further with adultery and divorce, topics that continue to hold sway in the religious landscape of modern Christendom. Here he is wading into a contentious debate of his day. He stands in the middle of two powerful rabbis, one teaching that divorce is permissible for the smallest of infractions (let us be clear, these are infractions of disobedience committed by a woman against her husband) and the other upholds a much stricter view of what is or is not

grounds for termination of a marriage. Once again, Jesus comes in and says actually it is not so clear. Adultery is not simply sleeping with some else's wife and divorce is not simply a dissolution of marriage. We are grappling with how we honor ourselves and our relationships with one another. The role that trust plays in how we engage with one another and our responsibility to uphold that trust.

With that he transitions to the ultimate act of trust in the ancient world, verbal vows. Instead of signatures and notaries, no business transaction of the day would have been possible without a verbal confirmation of one's pledge to agreed upon terms. At the time, it was common practice to swear upon important things like family or God to sweeten the deal, really intensify the oath being sworn. Jesus is saying to his listeners, don't just not swear falsely, don't swear on God at all. Make your word so trustworthy that there is no need to swear

upon anything. The strength of your word and your relationships are enough.

In the end, we are left with more gray areas than we started with, but that seems to be the point. The law is the most basic of our obligations. Don't murder. Don't cheat. Don't steal. What Jesus is inviting us into is much more complex. More sticky. Honestly, harder work. The work of authentic relationships built on trust and compassion. The work of repairing and tending to those relationships at every turn as we navigate through this existence. Once again Jesus is attempting to teach us how to live in authentic community with one another and that lesson is never cut and dry. He never says this is exactly how it's done because there is no one way. Except to foster relationships that are built on love, compassion, and the fullness of human flourishing.

Amen.