

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene
Sunday, February 12, 2023
10am

Text: Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

I was reminded recently of the story of Jarena Lee.¹ Ms. Lee was the first Black female preacher in the United States. She was also the first ordained female minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1816, the AME split from the Methodist Episcopal Church (one of the foremothers of our denomination). The founder of the AME was Richard Allen. The Methodist Episcopal Church had granted him a license to preach, but he and other Black Methodists were denied full rights in the church because of their skin color. So, he left and formed the AME, a Black Methodist denomination that is still thriving today.

Jarena Lee was baptized in and nurtured by the AME Church. And it was in that church she received from God a call to preach the Gospel. But when she told Richard Allen he informed her that the church’s *Discipline* – its rulebook – did not allow women to be preachers. For eight years Ms. Lee accepted the church’s discipline and resisted God’s call. But one day, while listening to a male preacher give a sermon, she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She sprang to her feet and began to give her own impromptu sermon. She later wrote, “God made manifest [God’s] power in a manner sufficient to show the world that I was called to labour according to my ability, and the grace given unto me.”

Richard Allen happened to be in attendance that day. After listening to Jarena Lee’s testimony, he rose in front of all the people and told them that God had changed his mind; despite what the church’s rules said, he was now convinced that God had called Jarena Lee to preach. And so, she began her ministry, traveling throughout the United States, preaching the Gospel to whomever would listen. She is one of the saints of our tradition, a testimony to the persistence of God’s call and a trailblazer for female preachers everywhere.

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/jarena-lee-first-black-female-preacher-in-the-ame-church>

I share this story because it is a story about how we relate to rules. Jarena Lee knew the rules of her church. So did Richard Allen. They both believed it was important to honor those rules. But over time it became clear to both of them that God was working outside the rules.

The Bible is full of rules. In our Bible Year study, we are currently reading the Book of Leviticus – a book full of rules. For first century Jews like Jesus, this book forms the basis of the Law (with a capital ‘L’). The Law is God’s expectation for how the nation of Israel ought to live in community with themselves, with their neighbors, and with God. The rules exist for a reason: They set the Jewish people apart from their non-Jewish neighbors. Being set apart is how the Jews keep themselves holy.

But the problem is that God’s people tend to forget the purpose of practicing holiness. Holiness does not exist for its own sake. God gave the ancient Jews the Law so that in practicing holiness they would be a light to the nations. Their holiness is for the sake of their witness. And their witness is for the sake of God’s mission in the world. In fact, that is what holiness means: Not piety or perfection or self-righteousness, but to be set apart for God’s purposes.

[pause]

At the end of last week’s Scripture lesson, Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt 5:17-18).

These words make clear that Jesus holds the Law in high regard. He clearly states he did not come to abolish the Law, but unfortunately that is the attitude most Christians have toward the Hebrew scriptures: *We have Jesus, and Jesus supersedes the Law; therefore, it does not apply to us.*

Even the term used to describe today’s Scripture lesson perpetuates that notion. The verses we heard read are called “The Antitheses.” An antithesis is the opposite of something. When Jesus says, “You have heard it said...but I say,” he gives the impression that his teaching is the opposite of the Law. But this pattern of speech is a type of rhetoric. Jesus is trying to communicate an important lesson to his disciples. His words are not the opposite of the Law – they do not abolish or

negate or nullify or supersede what Moses and the Prophets taught. Instead, Jesus *intensifies* what they taught. He ups the ante. He raises the standard of behavior. He is calling his disciples – that includes us! – to go above and beyond what the rules say. And paradoxically, sometimes going above and beyond what the rules say means relaxing our grip on those rules so we can grasp the kin-dom values that underly them.

[pause]

There are six antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount; we heard the first four read today. Each one touches on a major teaching in the Decalogue, the portion of the Law we know as the Ten Commandments. And each one addresses how we ought to practice love toward each other.

1. The Law says: Do not murder. But Jesus says: Love shows no hostility. At the root of murder is hostility. If we are angry at someone and insult them, we are also breaking God's command. Words kill, too. So, we must submit the thoughts we think and the words we speak to God's judgment. If our relationship with another person is broken, we should make every effort to mend it. We cannot be reconciled to God if we are not reconciled to each other.
2. The Law says: Do not commit adultery (aka do not go to bed with another person's spouse). But Jesus says: Love is not predatory. At the root of adultery is lust. You can lust after someone without touching them. God calls us to account for not only our physical deeds, but the intention of our hearts. In our hearts we must not objectify each other's bodies.
3. The Law says: It is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. But Jesus says: Love does not abuse the Law. There is no prohibition against divorce in the Torah. Divorces were easy to obtain in Jesus' time, which meant that they were often abused, to the social detriment of women. Jesus instructs his disciples: Just because something is legal does not mean it is moral. The Law cannot be used as a cover for selfishness.
4. The Law says: Do not swear falsely. But Jesus says: Love is unconditionally truthful. It is not enough to promise that certain words you speak are

truthful. All your words should be truthful! Mean what you say and do not use your words to manipulate others.

Before I continue, note: Jesus frequently uses hyperbole to get his points across. If you commit the sin of lust, does Jesus actually expect you to gouge out your eye or cut off your hand? No, but the intensity of his teaching makes his point that we are called to do more than just the bare minimum in honoring each other. Likewise, adultery is not the only acceptable reason for divorce. But again, the intensity of Jesus' teaching makes his point that marriage is sacred, and divorce should never be undertaken lightly.

Hyperbole aside, these are challenging teachings. Jesus affirms the Law as it stands, but then he *radicalizes* it. He looks for the radix – the root – of God's commands. And the root of these commands is about more than legislating human behavior. They cut right to the motivations of the human heart. What motivates your heart? Jesus wants our hearts to be motivated by love for God and neighbor. Jesus tells his disciples, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). In the kingdom of God, we are not called to do the bare minimum that our faith dictates. We are called to demonstrate radical love for each other. This is holiness: Not displays of piety, but displays of radical love.

How is it that Jesus can say these things? Because Jesus has come to fulfill the Law. He relocates religious authority from the Law to himself. Jesus becomes our hermeneutic – our method – for interpreting the whole of Scripture. He is the Word of God (with a capital 'W') by which we read the words of God. We read and interpret Scripture through the lens of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In all he did, Jesus demonstrated the way of radical love.

[pause]

Jarena Lee wrote in her autobiography, "O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God."²

² "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee," 1849

What are we to make of Richard Allen's decision to license Jarena Lee to preach, despite the church's prohibition, a prohibition based in Scripture? Ms. Lee's story is a reminder that the Word of God (with a capital 'W') reserves the right to transcend the (little 'w') words of God. Jesus does not encourage us to transgress the Law; he encourages us to transcend it. And by becoming the lens through which we interpret Scripture, he empowers us to discern the will of God for ourselves.

Jesus knows that we are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. We will encounter ethical scenarios that the Law did not foresee. He gives us a model we can use to discern for ourselves God's perfect will in our imperfect world: A model of radicalization. The kin-dom of God is marked by the radicalization that Jesus teaches – always seeking, always discerning the radix – the root – of God's will. And that will is the same it has always been: To draw the circle of God's love ever wider until the whole world falls within its boundaries.

Amen.