

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgement

➤ *For mornings bright (verses 1 and 4)*

Call to Worship

How blessed are we when we meditate on God's teachings;

and when we desire God with our whole hearts.

Let us praise God with attentive minds and eager spirits,

for we are God's servants, working and praying together.

So let us worship God and praise God's holy name.

Let us seek God's path and listen for God's call.

† Gathering Prayer and Words of Hope

God of all life and each life, you are the light of minds that seek to know you. You are strength for those who seek to serve you. You reveal truth to those who search for you. In worship, we pause in your presence, resting from our work and responsibilities, from our worries and distractions. We come to enjoy your presence and praise you for the gift of life in Christ and in creation. Receive our prayers and praise this day, for we open our hearts in love and loyalty to you, O God.

You call us to choose life and walk in your ways, but we are tempted by short cuts and easy solutions. You ask us to turn from anger and settle our differences, but we cling to grievances and point fingers at others. You ask us to be true to our word, but we prefer to keep everyone happy. Forgive us, O God, and give us courage to follow the paths you set before us. **Amen**

God invites us to choose life and find the blessing that comes from following God's ways. Accept God's gift of forgiveness and choose new life. Forgive one another and discover the peace of Christ.

➤ *We come to ask your forgiveness*

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† Prayer for Understanding

God of promise and purpose, amid life's distractions, still our minds to listen. In the midst of competing voices, speak your Word of truth. Send your Spirit to help us make wise choices. In the name of Jesus, our teacher and saviour, we pray. Amen

Scripture **Deuteronomy 30: 15-20** [OT 186]

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5: 21-37 [NT 4]

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.

It was also said, *'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'* But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

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.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Message

We read this passage at *Inclusive Christians: Around the Table* on Wednesday afternoon. When we moved into small groups for a quick conversation about it, I was wondering what these younger, often wiser, people would say about the text – what message of hope or challenge they might hear – how, or if, they would find it relevant. I wondered if we would end up on a tangent – avoiding the difficulties of the text all together.

You have heard it said... but I say to you...

This is kind of Jesus in a nutshell. What you thought you knew is not quite right. Perhaps your way of being is not as life-giving as God intended.

What the students noted immediately was that it is a longer selection and that there is so much that maybe we could only look at part of it. Was there something that functioned as an overarching theme? A couple of things came to mind...

How is the text different if we remember that Jesus is addressing a community rather than individuals? It is not so much about our private morality as it is about our public ethics – the way a society lives together – how it values one another. It is all about relationships – murder, adultery, divorce, oaths – they all have to do with how we are to interact with one another in community. They are all about upholding trust and compassion within human community.

Jesus didn't mean to literally tear out your eye or cut off your arm – although there have been and are communities that read it that way. We recognized the hyperbole – the radical nature of what Jesus was advocating. His teaching here is countercultural – not because

it rejected the law of Moses but because it fulfilled it – achieved it, lived up to it, made it happen, made it real.

You have heard it said... but I say to you... Jesus' words are less command than promise. God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for you. God intends to use you to create a different kind of world. Jesus calls this new world the kingdom of God – where violence doesn't always breed more violence and hate doesn't always kindle more hate. Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the logic of Jesus' kingdom well when he stated, *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."*

The students focused on the divorce section – I think because it has the most relevance for their lives. Most of them have either experienced it in their immediate family or have friends who have. One student said they were from a "super divorced family" – but we didn't explore that comment too fully! They expressed concern about the harshness of Jesus' words about divorce knowing that it is prevalent in our society – knowing that it is often the right decision for people – knowing that things are not always as black and white as they might seem. They shared and pondered, and I offered some small insight concerning divorce...

At a time when women were viewed as property and could not themselves seek a divorce, In Jesus's day, women whose husbands divorced them were often left to starve in the streets. They had no financial recourse, they would not be welcomed back into their childhood homes, and the social stigma attached to divorce was severe. Jesus, like some other Rabbis, was concerned that certificates of divorce could be given easily, even whimsically. A husband could divorce his wife because 'he found something objectionable about her'. Such an abuse of the law left many women destitute.

What if Jesus is saying, "It's not enough to follow the letter of the law, hand your wife a certificate of divorce, and send her packing – as if you have no further obligation to a fellow human being. What about her vulnerability? Her shame? Her future? Jesus speaks in terms that make it clear that anyone who treats the commitment of marriage lightly, so that it can be brushed aside, does a serious thing with difficult consequences for all concerned.

In the beloved community Jesus is shaping, we have a responsibility to uphold each other's dignity as siblings in Christ – even when our relationships as spouses or partners come to an end. That deeper responsibility cannot be signed away with a piece of paper. It endures no matter what. Jesus is encouraging the community to not merely follow the

letter of the law regarding divorce but to fulfill the intent – to ensure that no one is cast easily to the fringe of society – to protect those who are most vulnerable.

Jesus message is radical because he wants us to consider not just the commandments – not just the law and the teaching of the prophets – but what underlies those teachings. He is pushing people to see the heart of the law – getting everyone’s attention back to the basics of God’s commands. He is raising the bar.

Think about it... doesn’t murder seems like a fairly easy command to keep – well, it is for me anyway. Even as a society we expect that at the very least we will not go around killing each other. The bar is set pretty low. *But I say to you...* How we interact with our neighbours and the quality of our relationships matters. You who are created in the image of the divine can aspire to so much instead of settling for so little. No belittling of one another, no nursing of grudges, no hate speech or slurs. Instead reconcile – be at peace.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' *But I say to you...* didn’t get much airtime on Wednesday. In our world today so many consider fidelity an old fashioned and outdated concept. Yet Jesus reminds us that what is in our heads and hearts is as important as our actions.

Our conversation got lively again with, *'You shall not swear falsely...* *But I say to you, do not swear at all.... just yes or no – and mean it!* Integrity – straightforward truthfulness – trust – these resonated with us in our small group. Elaborate words designed to impress are just that – words – and being wary of empty promises and fake news is second nature to my young friends. The essence of a promise is that it is kept. Jesus says, keep it uncomplicated and plain. If you are for something, say ‘yes’ – if you are against it say ‘no’.

This passage from Matthew is not likely anyone’s favourite because it sounds harsh and unyielding – excessive and controlling but in truth it is about how we see other people and God. How we treat them in our heart of hearts. The law of God was meant to foster human flourishing at every level, including at the deepest levels of our hearts and minds. God wants us to respect each other – to love each other – to see God’s own image residing deep within one another. Jesus is calling on the community to embrace the commandments God has offered and to fulfill them – to bring forward through them God’s desire for us all to be blessed.

God wants us to treat each other well. God cares a lot about our dignity. God doesn’t want us to settle for bare minimums in the communities we create; God wants us to relate in ways that reflect the fullness of divine love, mercy, grace, and generosity.

Jesus' teaching in this text pushes us to see our own frailty – our own sin – and reminds us that we all rely on grace alone. He isn't condemning us; he's reminding us of truths we intuitively know. The way of love is hard. It's costly. It hurts. But let's not fool ourselves; there is a place called hell. It's the place we create for each other every time we choose an easy and austere legalism over an arduous and radical love.

Jesus pushes us to pay attention to what is important. You matter. How you live with each other matters. What you say and do, what you focus on, what you prioritize as my disciples – these things matter! Your choices have life-and-death consequences, so please take your communal lives seriously. Please don't make faith harder for yourselves and for others by settling for bare minimums. Reconcile with each other. Honor each other. Speak truthfully to each other. Protect each other. Do these things – not to earn God's blessings, but because you are already so richly blessed.

You have heard it said... but I say to you... that so much more is possible than you have yet comprehended. Reach for it. Walk into it. Sustain it. You are loved and blessed, right here, right now. There is nothing left for you to earn, but everything for you to share. Be the beloved and flourishing community God desires and that you long for.

➤ *Lord of all power*

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Offering and Prayer *Praise God from whom all blessings flow* 306

Some choices can bring life and blessing, but others lead to despair. When we give our gifts to God, we make a choice for life, a choice to bless others in God's holy name. So trust that God will bless the choice we make today.

Gracious and generous God, we bring our gifts to you in thanksgiving. Bless them and surprise us by all the Holy Spirit can accomplish with them. Bless our lives, too, so that our choices will always honour you for Christ's sake. Amen

† Pastoral Prayers and The Lord's Prayer (response: *God, in your mercy – **hear our prayer.***)

God of Life and Love, in spoken words and in the silence of our hearts, we give you thanks for all of life – for the grace you provide to creation in its diversity, and for your loving kindness known in the details of our lives. Hear us, we pray, as we speak of matters on our hearts and minds this day:

Where the church is divided by squabbling or deep disagreement – where Christians emphasize our differences instead of seeking unity in Christ – where we put energy into guarding tradition at the expense of honouring new life and relationships with our neighbours: transform us and make all things new. God, in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

Where families are divided by old hurts or new tensions – where friendships have ended through misunderstanding or neglect – where relationships have been severed by betrayal or thoughtlessness: transform us and make all things new. God, in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

Where countries are torn by war and conflict – where communities are divided by prejudice or unexamined privilege – where leaders provoke anger instead of building understanding co-operation: transform us and make all things new. God, in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

Where the poor and lonely find little support or comfort – where people are tired from overwork or pressured by rising costs – where workers fear for their jobs in the present or the future: transform us and make all things new. God, in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

Where people suffer pain with physical, emotional or spiritual roots – where loss marks the beginning and ending of every day – where young people fear for the future of the planet and their elders mourn the loss of what they once assumed would last: transform us and make all things new. God, in your mercy – **hear our prayer.**

God, our Source and Saviour, in Christ you make all things new, and so, united in one voice, we pray the words Jesus taught... ***Our Father, who art in heaven – hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen***

➤ ***To show by touch and word***

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Blessing

Go with joy and peace, to claim new life as you serve God and one another. And may the blessing of God who is Source, Saviour and Spirit of Life be with you and those whose lives you touch, this day and always. Amen

➤ ***We are marching (repeat)***

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