

**But I Say to You...**  
by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur  
for Berkeley Chinese Community Church  
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21 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

MATTHEW 5: 21-26

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Last week we left Jesus telling his disciples that they need to surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees! His surprised disciples couldn't believe it - they were just beginners at this - how are we supposed to be better than the most righteous of the righteous?



And Jesus tells them - he reminds that they are the salt of the earth and light of the world just as they are - just as God made them - and it's about how you treat and respect others just as they are.

Don't forget - these are newbies - they are in many ways clueless.

They're kind of bumble along - they argue about everything -  
- about who is first among them,  
- about who rides in the boat,

- about who can walk on water,  
Certainly doesn't sound like life on the road with Jesus is a preview of peace and harmony or heaven on earth. So - it's no wonder that Jesus has to be more specific. That's when we get to today's reading...where Jesus gives examples about how to surpass the righteousness of the pharisees. Jesus goes to something they all know - the ten commandments...  
Jesus must be thinking - everyone should know this: Thou shalt not kill...

And Jesus tells them - they say, don't kill, well...I say - don't even get angry, don't even call names. In fact - you gotta reconcile with them...so don't even bring your spiritual gifts to the altar..to the church if you don't reconcile with whoever you are angry with first!  
Isn't it interesting what Jesus does with the law here?

Have you seen the bumper stickers that say "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it?" That is NOT the attitude that Jesus has! He did not take the words of scripture at face value. Instead he dug deep into them and he offered his interpretations and insights.



That's *midrash*, right? Midrash is the way that Jewish scholars through the ages have done this kind of digging and interpretation. In a Hebrew bible, there is *midrash* all around the texts...different understandings by revered rabbis. And these varied interpretations become part of holy book. Jesus practices *midrash*. The understanding of scripture, to Jesus and other great lovers and interpreters of the bible, is that it reveals the ongoing presence of God.

The books of the bible are a way to give witness to how God has

been experienced by a people. The goal for these books is not to be faithful to the scripture, but to be faithful to the God revealed in scripture.

So digging into the text, and considering new ways to understand it, does not show any disrespect of scripture, no minimization of its importance. Quite the contrary, it keeps it alive and meaningful to a broad scope of time, place and circumstance.

Whoops - I get carried away sometimes when I get excited - I don't often get a chance to talk about how we read the bible!

Let's get back to Jesus' first example - remember? Jesus said - they say, don't kill, but...I say - don't even get angry, don't even call names....you gotta reconcile with whoever you're mad at before you offer anything at the altar!  
That's a tall order -

Remember the story about the Ten Commandments Lesson in a first grade Sunday School class?



The teacher had explained the commandment to honor Thy father and mother. Then she asked the class, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" A hand shot up and without missing a beat, Jonah - who is the oldest sibling in his family, answered, "Thou Shalt Not Kill!"



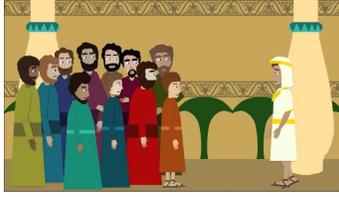
Tell Jonah to not be angry at his siblings when he feels like killing them after they messed up yet another lego creation he was proud of! And then we're supposed to reconcile? to forgive? Ha! "In your dreams!" Jonah would say.

This story reminds me of another one - one that we all know - the story of Joseph....the guy who had the coat of many colors. The guy with siblings who were angry with him - and who every reason to be mad at his brothers....



Remember? Joseph, when he was young was vain, stuck up, and annoying. He was his father's obvious favorite - when he got that coat of many colors - that was the straw that broke the camel's back as they say.

His brothers got sick of it - they threw him down a well. Then they sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt, where, through plot twists as many and weird as any convoluted contrived TV movie plot, he became the most powerful guy in the land. Meanwhile, back at the ranch (as they say), his family and nation were starving from famine. So his brothers come to Egypt and beg him for help. They don't recognize him, of course. That makes it such a better story. But he knows who they are, and, in spite of the grief, the pain, the anger he might still carry, he finds mercy somewhere in himself and he forgives them.

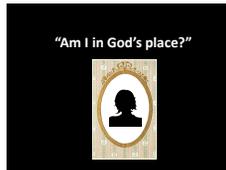


I once heard someone wonder aloud about Joseph when he recognized his siblings - did he pause and ask himself, "Am I in the place of God?". Didn't he want to zap them? But maybe he asked "Am I in the place of God" It is one of those Hebrew phrases that has many meanings.

AM I IN GOD'S PLACE?



Do I stand in for God?  
Do I see with God's eyes?  
Do I know the whole story?  
Am I not, standing in God's house, in God's Place here?  
It made me wonder - What if we paused each time we feel something angry we would be sorry for and ask ourselves, "Am I in God's Place?"



Or when we feel an opportunity to forgive slip away, we pause and ask ourselves, "Am I in God's Place?" Somewhere deep inside each of us - there is God's image - we are after all each made in God's image, right? - are we not called to "stand in God's place?" And sometimes we don't act as we should - maybe we should not to beat ourselves up if that opportunity slips away. There will be other opportunities and other incidences that require us to respond with forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an essential and difficult Spiritual Practice for Christians. Jesus doesn't say it's optional, or a thing we might consider. He left us a prayer that forces us to it week after week after week: forgive us our sins, our debts, our trespasses, as we ourselves forgive others....

None of us are saints, we are going to have to practice this over and over. And our minds will always tell us why this particular resentment is too special to be dropped. We could forgive so much, we think, but not this resentment, or that one. Joseph doesn't wait to forgive his brothers until they acted right. They never act right. He forgives them because he can forgive them—because it is his way, his Practice.



And oh yes - who do we follow? We follow in the footsteps of the one who forgave his executioners... And he didn't forgive them because they repented and were sorry. He forgave them because it was his Way, his Practice.

So - how about practicing this practice? Are you game? Get into small groups of 2 or 3 and share with each other a hurt, resentment, incident that might be waiting for you to forgive. Don't worry that your forgiveness might be psychologically premature. Because if it works for you like it works for me, you can pick those resentments right back up if you miss them when you leave here this morning. It'll all be ok!



I'll give you a couple of minutes to share, come back together and share what the experience was like and we'll end with a prayer together...<<congregation shares....2-3 minutes, ask congregants to share key phrases and words from the conversation >>

God of mercy and grace, Thank you for this opportunity to share our burdens and to grow closer to each other and to You. Thank you for an opportunity to forgive like you always forgive us. Thank you for understanding us and still loving us. Thank you for for Jesus' words "But I Say To You..." to help us dig into your commandments that we might see you more clearly and follow you more closely. Help us to continue this practice that your commandments grow into our commitments to you and to the beloved community we are yearning for. Amen.