

Sermon for Sunday, February 16, 2014 Epiphany 6 Matthew 5:21-37 "Love and Respect"

The three year old boy was adorable. Dimples in his cheeks, a Kirk Douglas cleft in his chin, a winning smile. His mother was juggling her own meal, a bag, a cell phone call, and trying to keep an eye on her child all at once. The boy looked at mom, realizing she had momentarily looked away, and started blowing massive bubbles into his drink. She turned toward him and said "No! No bubbles!" My lunch companion and I were laughing – we both had raised boys and we knew just how much little boys love blowing bubbles in their milk – and the boy giggled a bit, even as he stopped blowing through the straw. Then mom was once again distracted as she took a call, and he saw his opening. She wasn't looking. He was in the clear. And in an instant, he blew through that straw and made bubbles once more. Sure, mom had said "no bubbles." But it was so much fun, and she wasn't looking now, and we were laughing with him, so he bubbled away. Against the rules, but he had come up in that moment with several reasons why he thought he could do it. At the age of three, he had already learned how to finesse the rules.

We are masters of finessing the rules, aren't we? We find excuses to justify what we do. We know what the rules are. We know what we are supposed to do. And yet we come up with excuses, reasons to explain that what we are trying to do isn't really a violation, the situation is just different. We find a way to convince ourselves that what we are doing is alright.

When we're children, our parents set rules for us. If we are one of those children who are independent or creative or just plain old difficult, our parents layer rules upon rules, hoping to control our behavior. But still we manage to find ways to justify breaking those rules ("But Grandma said I could!").

It doesn't change when we are adults. This is the reason why the tax code is thousands of pages. Because every time someone makes a rule, someone else tries to figure out a way to avoid adhering to it. This is the reason why banking regulations have become more and more complex in the wake of the financial meltdown of 2008. We try to regulate people's behavior with rules, and it rarely works.

If we consider how things worked in Jesus' time, how the people of Israel tried to live into the covenant that had been made with God, it was all about the rules. Almost 700 of them, listed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, enforced with intense preaching and teaching by the Pharisees, who recognized that people were getting rather lazy about keeping the rules that were supposed to guarantee a good relationship with God.

But we know human nature, right? You make rules, people try to finesse them. And the Pharisees recognized that people were finessing them, and kept chastising them for playing games with the rules.

It clearly wasn't working.

If we take it as a given that God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to come to earth to repair what was evidently a broken, or at least flawed, relationship between God and God's people. The rules weren't fixing the brokenness, so God sent Jesus down to offer an alternative method.

Now here we are hearing this gospel passage – it's the tail end of the Sermon on the Mount, after Jesus has given the listening crowd a vision of the world turned upside down, that the meek – the MEEK! – will inherit the earth, that the poor get the kingdom of heaven, that those who fight for justice will be fulfilled. These were pretty radical words for folks who were victims of Roman oppression and who had over the centuries been victimized by other conquerors. Here's this Jesus, this rabbi, telling them that they will finally, FINALLY, get something good.

But as with all good things, with the gift comes responsibility. So Jesus wants them to understand that they are supposed to treat each other in particular ways.

They might be thinking at this point, "yeah, I know the rules. The Pharisees tell us about the rules over and over again. Yeah, we know the rules. And we know which ones we can skate on, and which ones everybody ignores, and which ones are the really important ones."

But Jesus ups the ante. Remember, he has said that he hasn't come to them to preach against the laws – he knows that would get him in really big trouble with the religious leadership, and he really has no problem with the underlying reasoning behind the rules. He says, "I'm here so you all can really understand why there are rules. I'm expecting you not only to live by the letter of the law, I want you to think about the intent of each law, in ways that recognize that you are doing this not to get the Pharisees off your backs, but because you want to love God more deeply. Here's my point: to do that, you need to love each other in the same way that God loves you."

It's not just following the rules in a way that barely passes the sniff test of whether or not you're following them, it's following the rules BECAUSE you understand that it is about caring for each other as we hope we care for God.

So what does Jesus say?

He sets it up as a series of antitheses: statements that position an opposite point of view. But they're not classic antitheses. Even though Jesus starts each line with "You have heard it said *x*, but I say to you *z*..." they're not the exact opposite of what the law says. They are a deeper and more difficult interpretation of why the law instructs us as it does. And in that more challenging interpretation, Jesus takes away our wiggle room. He doesn't let us come up with reasons why, in my particular case, I don't really have to do what it says, because I have an explanation! Jesus says that he is amping up his expectations for us. We don't only have to follow the rule, we have to understand why the rule is important.

We don't only have to avoid killing people. That's generally pretty easy for us to do. We have to avoid all sorts of conflict. Even if it's only a disagreement – if we are fighting with our siblings, we have to go and make peace with them before we do anything else, even going to church. Why? Because God expects us to love each other and treat each other with respect, and to make it a central way of being throughout our lives.

We don't only have to avoid having affairs, we have to avoid even thinking of other people in that way. Not because God wants us to be prudes, but because God wants us to love each other and treat each other with respect, and we are objectifying someone by thinking of them as merely a sexual being, that's not love and respect.

We don't only have to stop making oaths and pledges, as if the words alone make it seem like we are really going to do what we promise and it doesn't matter what happens after we make the oath. We have to stop acting like oaths are more important than simply being men and women of our word, that when we say we will do something, we do it without any grand gesture, and when we say we will not do something, we never do it. If it's all about appearances, and swearing on the Bible certainly is a powerful visual image, with no sense that we actually have to follow through, that's a sign of disrespect. It is disrespect for the person to whom we make the promise. It is disrespect for God if we pledge in God's name. It is disrespect for ourselves, because we are not true to our own word. If we love God and love each other, we don't make a show of making promises we don't intend to keep.

It's like blowing bubbles in milk. It's still wrong even if mom's back is turned. It's still wrong even though your dimples are really cute. It's still wrong despite the fact that it's really fun to do when we have told mom we won't do it any more.

We are, as I said before, masters of finessing the rules. But if we believe that there is only one master, the master not of finesse but of love, we can see what folly our sidesteppings are. Jesus teaches us the driving reason behind all of the law: because following the law is recognizing God's love for us, because following the law is a sign of our love for God, because following the law is a mark of love and respect for our fellow human beings, as we promised when we were baptized.

No excuses. No finesse. No side-stepping. No dodging because of technicalities. Only love and respect, because God asks for it and gives it...and because our hearts should seek nothing less.

Amen.