



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 16, 2020  
SIRACH 15:15-20; PS. 119:1-8; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9; MATTHEW 5:21-37

## CHOOSE LOVE. CHOOSE LIFE.

*Matthew 5:21-37* Jesus said, “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.”

When I was growing up, we were not permitted to use bad language or to call each other bad names. I have four little brothers—who could be plenty annoying—and I will tell you there are a few bad

names that would have applied well at any given time!

What do you think those bad names might have been? Now don’t say them out loud—this is church!

But just for a second, imagine the bad things we might, and do, call each other.

Well, the big bad name my Mom did not allow us to call each other, or anyone, was... "STUPID." We couldn't call anyone stupid.

Seems pretty mild, almost silly, doesn't it, worrying about just saying "stupid," in this era of eviscerating each other on social media, on the news, on the streets, in the halls of Congress; spray painting insults on sacred spaces. This is the current low we've sunk to.

But I stand with my mother. It's not mild to call someone "stupid." I may be dating myself (ok, Boomer)—but I was pretty strict about language, too, like my mother, and I didn't allow my kids to call each other "stupid" either. Because it is violent to name-call. It gives permission to harm. Even absent a physical blow, the word itself cuts, and it has repercussions.

Now I do live in the real world, here with you. "Stupid" is not the ugliest word out there, is it? So why am I harping on that?

Because in today's Gospel, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder...' 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."

Pretty steep punishment for calling somebody a name, don't you think – in our nation where name-calling has become the top-down national policy and pastime? Jesus' words here are shocking! On purpose.

Hear it this way: *You have heard it said you shall not murder.* **But I say to you**, doing violence with your words is the same intent. It is wrong.

Now I'm not worried that I'm "going to go to hell" because I might have called my brother "stupid" once or twice when my Mom wasn't in earshot. But I am worried, and contrite, that I sometimes did – and sometimes still can get riled up and do – violence with my words.

And what of the rest of this Gospel? "*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." Again, shocking language, shocking images from Jesus. But he makes his point: when we objectify and demean each other, we do violence to each other. And that is not how we live in the law of Love, and in the light of Christ. That is not how we choose life.

And then these verses on divorce! The cultural explanation on this comes up in sermons year after year, importantly: it has so much more to do with the law of Love, with protecting women – who were so very vulnerable in the uber-patriarchal society of Jesus' day – protecting women from being summarily cast aside – and therefore, outcast – by the whim of a husband. And what did we do with that? For years, Church cast divorced people aside and away from the Lord's table. Now THAT's doing violence to the Word. THAT's what's shocking.

Absolutely, Jesus is intentional with his words here. But not about giving us tougher new laws. He came to bring us LIFE: John 10:10—*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly!* And abundant life isn't about having laws that are impossible to keep!

The reading from Sirach this morning says:

*If you choose, you can keep the commandments,  
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.*

and

*Before each person are life and death,  
and whichever one chooses will be given.*

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the message again and again is that when you live into your relationship with God, loving God and loving neighbor, you have life. If you reject your relationship with God, you choose death. We tend to hear that literally, with the exile and captivity, as a kind of historic hyperbole.

But we actually know better by our own experience—know that it is the truth. When we are out of sync with God, out of sync with the law of Love, we are miserable within ourselves. I know that feeling. You know that feeling. And when we are out of sync with God's law of Love, we become the broken society we see starkly all around us today. When we are out of sync with God's law of Love, we destroy God's creation for our greed and convenience.

But Jesus stands here, emphatically telling us to choose life! It's not just an abstraction. And the way we choose life is in choosing how we live. That's why Jesus expands what you "have heard said," to what **Jesus says to you**: Go deeper, go fuller, go more intentionally. That is where the life in the Spirit is!

So when our Law is not about nit-picking, it becomes about how we live every day, and every breath. It is about walking in His ways. Because that is the only way to choose life!

Today's Gospel passage from Matthew is part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' great teaching. In the verses preceding, Jesus has just called "blessed" the merciful, the peacemakers, the meek, the pure in heart, the hungry; he has charged his disciples to be

the salt of the earth, the light of the world. To choose life.

And then we hear today's words: you've heard it said not to murder, **but Jesus says to you**, don't do violence to another, even with your words. That's what choosing life is about.

You've heard it said don't commit adultery, **but Jesus says to you**, don't hurt each other by objectifying and demeaning each other. That's what choosing life is about.

You've heard it said men in those days could write a certificate of divorce and then go their merry way and leave a woman destitute. **But Jesus says to you** that's not what choosing life is about.

Choosing life is not something you can parse out! You have to go all in. No "murder is wrong, but calling your brother stupid is okay." Violence and harm are wrong. Choosing life, living into my relationship of love with God, and with my neighbor, requires much deeper living from me, and from you.

The great Jewish thinker and writer Etty Hillesum, who was murdered at Auschwitz, wrote in her diary:

*"All disaster stems from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbour. Because I and my neighbour and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war with all its excrescences by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us, and giving it a chance to live. And I believe that I will never be able to hate any human being for his so-called wickedness, that I shall only hate the evil that is within me, though hate is perhaps putting it too strongly even then. In any case, we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves."*

When I read the book of Etty's diaries and letters a decade ago, I was overwhelmed with her, with her

immense capacity for love and deep hunger and openness to her relationship with God in the midst of the most brutal, dehumanizing circumstances. She chose life every day, in the midst of death being thrust in her path at every turn. She chose it by the way she lived and held onto love.

Because it is A CHOICE. Make no mistake. We stand at the brink. Generation after generation has stood here. And the name-calling and just-following-orders that sent people to concentration camps won the day long enough for six million Jews to be murdered, just as name-calling and convoluted legalism in our time is condoning sending people into Sanctuary and **for-profit** Detention Centers. And is preventing those of us who disagree with each other from being able to talk with each other and do something better!

Jesus stands before us, in this difficult passage, saying, “Choose God’s way of Love, choose life,” because our choices are not just for ourselves, but they impact our planet-Earth-home itself, the shape of the society we live in, and the real people around us.

You can’t parse that out into legalisms. You have to live in love whole-heartedly, full-spirit. None of us will be perfect at that. *But Jesus isn’t calling us into a checklist of morality, but to a flourishing of life.*<sup>2</sup> So we can keep choosing it, again and again. Because what we choose... is what we are given.

Etty wrote from the Holocaust:

“We could fight war...by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us, and giving it a chance to live.”

Let’s choose *that*.

<sup>1</sup> Etty Hillesum, [An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943; and Letters from Westerbork](#), New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Barreto, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4371](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4371)



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