

'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.

Matthew 5: 21-24

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There are two options, about what Jesus says today in Matthew. Which of the two you choose makes all the difference.

The first interpretation is that Jesus is giving us "the 10 commandments on steroids,"¹ as one commentator called them. We should not murder, but we also can't be angry. We can't even show up to make a gift at church unless we've first successfully resolved *every difference* with *every person* we know. The Ten Commandments on Steroids!

Since we're in the middle of a pledge campaign, and I'm hoping all of you will declare your intended pledges of offerings to the church in the next two weeks, by the end of February, so we can plan the year, I not anxious to have all of you, en masse, rise and depart this instant, never to return and offer a gift here until every single dispute in your life is settled!

Although, were all those disputes to be resolved, I think upon your return, your generosity, in gratitude, would be astonishing!

But your pledging is not my real worry. The real worry is this: if Jesus is offering us the Ten Commandments on Steroids, with harsh requirements and harsh penalties, then we're all doomed. Doomed! Every single one of us.

By those standards, we might not even escape this worship service without hurling ourselves into the fire – you're bound to be irritated by something I'll say, or the off hand comment of someone during coffee hour, and then – it'd be hopeless.

¹ David Lose, "The Relational God," *Working Preacher* (February 11, 2014). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3071> This sermon owes a great deal to the thoughtful comments of both Lose and Peter Woods (see notes following). Thanks to both.

Great, we say – *so* glad I came to church this morning!

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But there is another way of hearing today's story: that Jesus is painting a picture of what the beloved community looks like, and inviting us into it. He's giving us a glimpse of how beautiful human life is meant to be, can be.

Life where we honor each other. Where we know that insults hurt, and that spitting out "Stupid!" "Fool" "Idiot" or worse --even in a flash of anger -- can crush a soul, so we hold back.

Jesus points today toward a life where we spend more energy affirming others' value than enumerating their failures. A life where, when we have hurt another in anger, as will happen because we're human, we'll have learned to drop other things, as less important, and just apologize. We'll do what it takes to reconcile, rather than battling to a litigious win.

There are two interpretations, when it comes to what Jesus says today. Which of the two you choose makes all the difference in whether you think religion is fear-based or loved-based. Is built on following the rules perfectly, or in building relationships in a beloved community.

Which interpretation you choose could determine whether religion is worth your time at all.

One member said today's reading reminded her of an absurd Monty Python monologue, the rules growing more and more preposterous with each clause. If that's what Jesus really meant, why would thinking people bother?

What did Jesus really mean?

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The "10 Commandments on Steroids" certainly seems like what we're hearing. The rule is not *just* "Do not murder," as Moses told the people of old; actually, the rule is that you can never even get angry. Don't call someone names, and never insult.

And if you "color within those lines," you'll be fine.² But if you don't, you're damned to hell.

² David Lose, see above.

Quite a few Christians over the years have chosen this interpretation, that Jesus was laying out reality: we humans can never hope to measure up to God's impossible standards, so our only hope is to fling ourselves on our knees, begging God's undeserved mercy. Our prayer book contains some words like these. But is that *all* Jesus intended, all that our prayer book teaches? Or is there more?

Because there is another view. And which you choose makes all the difference.

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The second view recognizes that Jesus was teaching the antithesis of "the Ten Commandments on Steroids." In fact, to understand the Sermon on the Mount as "the Ten Commandments on Steroids" just repeats the rigid, rule-bound religion from which Jesus sought to free us, rules that wouldn't let Jesus heal a man's deformed hand because it was the Sabbath.

Under the second view, Jesus wants us to still honor the Sabbath, but to do so by digging down and understanding *the intention behind* the commandment. The goal of the Sabbath is to give us fuller life, and touching a man's hand to heal it brings fuller life.

The intention of the commandment not to murder, says Jesus, is that we deeply value the lives of our fellow humans, despite our differences; that we wake to the fact that each person is made in God's own image, not just us; that the other is someone whose life we care about, not someone so lacking in value that we could snuff out their life force.

The deeper intention of the commandment against murder is to teach us ways of living together, and seeing each other, that transforms us and them. From enemy into sister. From opponent into brother, all equally children of God, especially when our interests diverge.

God's heart must break each time we in the Christian church have created the Ten Commandments on Steroids. When, in order to support a 'good' thing, like Christian marriage before God, the Church creates this new rule: we will marry you only if you have never have been divorced, and you love the people we think it's right for you to love.

When in order to protect the specialness of Jesus's gift in a shared meal of communion, the Church creates this new rule: you can receive communion only if you adhere to our interpretation of God's love, never get divorced, are free of sin or have adequately confessed.

Institutional religion, of every stripe, all across the globe, tends to fall into this trap: seeking clarity, we humans set up rules again, like the Ten Commandments on Steroids. Rigid church rules are comforting for many people, lay and clergy alike.

Many of us like being told by someone else, "Here are the rules, now follow them." We like knowing: As long as I profess these things, it's all good.

People leave the liberal tradition we represent here at King's Chapel because they want to be told just how to live. Just what to do. Just the things they should believe. But here, with humility, we say, We're not always sure. We respect each other's opinions. We don't say, as our critics claim, "Anything goes – do whatever you want." Instead, at least at our best, we say with great intentionality: I want to learn, grow, change, be more loving, like Jesus. And I'll gather with others who want to grow, too. I'll come worship and study and practice living in beloved community. Honoring others. Taking that seriously.

We do that because, since our founding, we have seen how many of God's beloved have been hurt by rigid church rules, premised more on people's depravity than on their possibility. We've seen, both in the days of the Puritans, and today, how deeply hurt people have been by exclusionary church rules, made in the name of Jesus.

My friends, there is an interpretation of Jesus' words today that does not create the Ten Commandments on Steroids. Which you choose makes all the difference.

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How would you size up the two options?

In some ways the second interpretation is easier to live because Jesus says, "Life in the beloved community is not built on things you must do, rules you must follow, but on what God already does, right now, all the time: God loves all people unconditionally.

The only thing for us is to discover the remarkable love God has for us. Because when we are secure in that, we're transformed into being able to love others with that same generosity. Jesus had found that in his own life, and wanted to share that good news with us.

But this second interpretation is harder than mere rule following, because it requires an inner journey, exploring why it's so hard for us to trust that we really are God's beloved ones. I'm hoping Lent will be a time for us to do that inner journey. Martin Smith's book has offered gentle daily guideposts for many, helping us notice why we've had to be so wary of trusting anyone who says, "I love you."

When we begin that pilgrimage into a relationship with a God who loves us, and when we "emerge"³ from this remarkable inner journey, we find we can act with more love and trust toward the world outside. Not every moment. Not every day.

³ Peter Woods, The Law of Love, or the Love of Law?

<http://thelisteninghermit.com/2011/02/08/the-law-of-love-or-the-love-of-law/>

But more and more, alongside others in God's beloved community, here – in this place – with those also on the journey.

A world built on rules that we'll inevitably fail to follow perfectly, makes us more self-loathing, as well as more contemptuous of others who can't comply. We tend to be driven by our fear of failing, and focus on tallies of who did or didn't do what. With rules, we keep score, win/lose.

But a world built on relationships – yours with God, and yours with others whom God loves –that is a world where we begin to act differently.

Today's passage jolts us to imagine what our world could be, were we to honor each other as beloved, blessed. We don't try just to avoid murder, but to respect each other. We listen more closely, assuming first that someone may have something worthwhile to share with us. We learn to construe what our neighbor says in the best light instead of in the worst. We hold another's welfare close to our hearts, and trust that she does the same for us.⁴

Jesus is radical – not by creating Commandments on Steroids – but by being perhaps the first genuine humanist, according to one theologian⁵ – who showed us that humans, when secured by love, when transformed by unconditional acceptance, are capable of good, true and beautiful acts. The reign of God, right here, within us and among us. Now!

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All this has application in that “easiest” of all human relations – marriages!

I first heard of John Gottman,⁶ researcher and counselor on marriage, on National Public Radio. The interview was one of those “driveway moments,” when you do actually sit in your car, even after you've arrived at your destination, just so you can hear the end of the radio interview.

⁴ Woods, see above.

⁵ Woods, citing theologian Don Cupitt.

⁶ Gottman's research is readily available. See, for example,
<http://couplestraininginstitute.com/gottman-couples-and-marital-therapy/>,
<http://www.gottman.com/research/research-faqs/>
<http://insightcounselling.blogspot.com/2012/05/excerpts-from-john-gottman.html>
<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200910/what-makes-marriage-work>

If you Google John Gottman's name, you'll see the many awards he's received from prominent institutions, the reams of careful, data-driven, peer-reviewed research he has conducted about marriage for 35 years at the University of Washington. The Gottman Research Institute has followed couples for years, in longitudinal studies, and not only interviewed them, but also videotaped them, minutely observing words as well as body language.

Gottman's goal has been to learn what distinguishes the "masters" from the "disasters," in other words, the marriages that endure from those that quickly end in divorce. Gottman now can predict with about 90% accuracy, from watching just five minutes of a couple's interactions, whether the marriage will survive. *The key variable is contempt.*

Gottman's work is not unlike what Jesus had to say about insulting others, or calling them fools. It matters enormously. Gottman says anger itself is not a problem – anger is just a human emotion, and its impact on a marriage is neutral, neither good nor bad. Anger, by itself, usually can best be understood as a way of saying, "Something is important to me, so please pay attention."

But how our anger is expressed matters greatly. Fights aren't the problem, but how we fight. Gottman's research shows the four dangerous ways of treating each other that can break a marriage, and each involves how we belittle the other person.

Relationships fail when we won't honor what the other person is trying to tell us – rather than really listening to what they're saying, we immediately get defensive, and retaliate by naming their failures, without actually responding to what they've said about our actions.

We convey that we're not listening by "stonewalling": avoiding eye contact, sitting in stony silence, or walking away.

Rather than directly complaining about the other person's actions, we attack the person him or herself. Instead of "you didn't get the groceries," it becomes "you never do what you promise."

But the worst, says Gottman, is when we are contemptuous, as if our partner disgusts us. When we stand in a position of moral superiority and demean them. When we feel contemptuous, all the research shows, our heart rates increase, our overall health declines, and we cannot even remember any of the admirable things about our partner. We literally cannot remember why we are in this relationship in the first place.

So the kinds of conduct towards others that we need to ban from our lives are those that show contempt; as the video captures, we need to ban: insulting our partner, calling them names, mocking them, using hostile humor, or conveying contempt by our facial expressions: sneering, curling our upper lip, rolling our eyes.

It's as if Jesus knew the same thing Gottman's videos have shown.

And the key to reversing this damage in a marriage, says Gottman, is to learn to reconcile, or manage the inevitable differences between partners, just like the inevitable differences in any community.

How people do this varies: sometimes we agree to disagree and make light of differences; sometimes we compromise, not getting perfectly what we want, but ensuring that all feel understood and respected. The marriages that last are fundamentally based in an admiration and fondness for one another.

In Gottman's counting, lasting married partners give positive feedback to one another in a ratio of 5:1, five positive comments for every one negative.

If you're interested, I'd love to have some discussions about Gottman's theories, because they seem to track this passage by Jesus so well, banning insults, abuse and contempt. Gottman even parallels the odd bit at the end of Jesus's talk, where he teaches how it is far better to reach a compromise early with someone than end up in bitter litigation.

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In marriage, in a church community, in this world, you can try to live either by rigid rules, delineating your rights versus mine, compelling obedience based on our mutual fear of punishment. Or you can live in a relationship, between you and God, and you and others, built on God's unconditional love.

Which of the two you choose comes down to this – the very heart of our passage today.

Could God ever hold you in contempt?

If yes, then why would you follow that God?

If no, then why do you ever need to have contempt for someone else?