

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 12, 2023
“A Matter of the Heart” (Matthew 5:21-37)

You’ve heard it said that there are two things in life that are certain, two things we simply cannot escape: taxes and death. It seems we are taxed at every turn: sales tax, gas tax, property tax, income tax, capital gains tax. There’s just no way to escape paying taxes. Nor can we escape death. Every person born eventually dies. In our gospel text for today, Jesus addresses another thing we humans cannot escape, and that is sin.

Sin is something many of us really don’t like to acknowledge. We’d rather ignore it, dismiss it, or excuse it. We think *That’s not really a sin; everybody does it or I messed up a little, sure; but I’m a good person or He sinned against me first; so my sin was justified.* We often have difficulty admitting our wrongdoing. Still, however we try to rationalize our actions, sin is a part of who we are. Every day we break our relationships with God and others, and every day we fall short of God’s glory. Jesus tells us why. Sin begins in our hearts – hearts that harbor all kinds of evil.

Our gospel text for today is a continuation of Jesus’ sermon on the mount. At the end of last week’s gospel, Jesus tells his hearers that they can’t enter the kingdom of heaven unless their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. The people understood righteousness to mean measuring up to what the law says and being able to meet its requirements. Righteousness, then, meant keeping the law.

And in the eyes of the people, the scribes and Pharisees had this down to a science. They were considered the best people of their day, and Jesus’ hearers (the common people) knew they couldn’t even begin to approach that kind of righteousness. So, by telling them that their righteousness had to exceed that of the religious leaders, Jesus wanted them to understand that their own righteousness could not save them. Not one of them had that kind of righteousness.

However, the righteousness they saw and admired in the religious leaders was a false one. Down through the ages, the religious leaders had manipulated and rationalized God’s commandments, essentially redefining the law into something they believed humans could actually achieve. Therefore, the religious leaders believed that, according to their own interpretation of the law, they were keeping God’s commandments and were thereby righteous before God. But in our text for today, Jesus raises the bar. He exposes their false interpretation and shows why sinners by their own efforts do not have genuine righteousness.

Jesus begins by using the fifth commandment: You shall not murder. To make this commandment humanly achievable, the religious leaders taught that only the act of murdering someone was a sin. Only if one killed another person would they face God’s judgment. But Jesus tells them there is more to this commandment than just avoiding the outward act of taking someone’s life. It includes the thoughts, emotions and attitudes of the heart.

Over and over again, he uses the phrase: *You have heard it said...but I say to you...* In this case, *You have heard it said, ‘Do not murder,’ but I say to you, ‘Do not be angry with a brother.’* Both

of these, Jesus says, will bring God's judgment. This is because murder begins in the heart. The anger harbored there can soon lead to hurtful and wicked words and actions.

How often have we blurted out words that were wrong, spiteful, or downright evil? They were words meant to harm our neighbor. But once the word escapes our hearts and lips, it cannot be taken back. The damage is done. How often have our actions – fueled from the anger and evil in our hearts – hurt and damaged those around us? We don't physically take their lives, but we do cause pain.

Every one of us gets angry. And anger, in and of itself, is not a sin. Even Jesus got angry with the money changers and merchants in the temple courtyard. But his was a righteous anger. Righteous anger flows from love for God and love for neighbor. In this case, Jesus was filled with zeal for God's house. The moneychangers had dishonored God and harmed the spiritual worship of the people. It was love for God and love for neighbor that moved Jesus to respond as he did. That's righteous anger.

We, on the other hand, try to excuse and justify our anger. We consider the way someone has wronged us and believe we have the right to be angry and the right to let that anger be known. But, so often, this is anger that wants to lash out with contempt, or name calling, or something worse. Rather than showing love and kindness, it wants to treat the other person as an enemy. Jesus warns us of this. He wants us to know that murder does not take require a gun, knife, or other deadly instrument. Our words and actions can kill just as easily. They can kill a person's spirit and destroy a person's self-worth. And they take root from the anger and hatred in our hearts.

We all have anger and hatred in our hearts. It's hard to escape. Thank God we do not need to depend on our own righteousness to save us. Thank God that Jesus has clothed us with his righteousness. But what we need to do is to think before we speak and pray that God gives us the wisdom and desire to respond as he would have us respond.

Murder is not the only evil that begins in our hearts. In the remaining verses, Jesus refers to lust, coveting, adultery, falsehood, and deception – all of which begin with the heart. He continues by saying, *You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* The Pharisees taught that only the action of adultery was a sin. But Jesus again tells us there is more to the sixth commandment. He tells us that it is lust in the heart that causes the eye to wander, and that any kind of look that has a lustful intention is sinful and impure.

Think of King David. While walking on the roof of his palace, he sees Bathsheba bathing. Her beauty captivates him and David begins to covet what is not his. He has Bathsheba brought to his bed. Then when evidence of his sin is about to become apparent to all, he has her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. We see how one lingering look led him to covetousness, to adultery, and then to murder. And it all began in his heart.

We are aware that, in our culture, sex fills the world around us. We encounter it each and every day through TV shows, movies, magazine ads, etc. Simply put: sex sells And because it

bombards us at every turn, we are tempted to excuse it by saying, *It's everywhere; I can't avoid it*. Or we may say, *It's not my fault if my eye wanders every once in a while*. But is it really just a problem with our eye? No, it's a matter of the heart, Jesus says. He stresses how the evil in our hearts can destroy our souls. It is so damaging that one should prefer to pluck out the eye or cut off a hand rather than let it lead us to sin.

So, does this mean Jesus is teaching mutilation here? No, he is using hyperbole (or exaggeration) to teach us how serious sins of the heart are. Jesus would not ask us to pluck or cut off a body part. He loves and values our bodies. He actively participated in our humanity, coming in human flesh to redeem both our bodies and souls. He offered up his own body to be beaten, whipped, and gouged to free us from our bodies of sin. And he promises to raise us up on the last day, with restored and glorified bodies to will live in his presence forever.

However, we might consider his command to pluck and cut off in regard to the choices we make. What movies will we watch? What parties will we attend? What websites will we surf? What music will we listen to? What magazines will we read? What jokes will we laugh at? Changing how we approach these things might feel like we're missing out on the fun everyone else is having, but if it keeps us from sin, it is well worth it. Jesus cautions us that the evil lying dormant in our hearts can easily be awakened and lead to a quick, immoral downfall that will rob the joy from our lives. So, he calls us to change the attitudes of our hearts.

We may feel that we are broken and can't change who we are or that we can't control the thoughts and feelings that fill our minds. We may think we are too weak to resist the temptations we face each and every day. But scripture reminds us that God has ways to overcome the sins of our hearts. God has the power to overcome any addiction or inclination that may afflict us. Paul tells us that *if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation*. With Christ – and the Spirit of God – on our side, we can die to sin and be raised to new life; for with God, all things are possible.

Think of Joseph in the Old Testament. Potiphar's wife tempted him time and again, but each time he refused. He answered his temptress by saying, *How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?* Finally, Joseph had to flee, leaving his robe behind. Christ encourages us to flee from sin, as well, and pray that God will make his presence known whenever temptations come. And they will come. Temptations abound, and sin is alive and well. Though many try to ignore, dismiss or excuse it, sin infects and affects all of us. It's a matter of the heart.

When we look at our hearts honestly, we'll discover that lurking there are hatred and anger, which is murder. Deep down and hidden away are lust and coveting, which are adultery and idolatry. Yet our gracious God gives us the strength and the encouragement to flee. By God's free, undeserved grace, we who believe have been made children of God. We are no longer our own because we have been brought with a price. On the cross, all the desires that oppose God were destroyed and our sins were buried with Christ. His righteousness covers them all so that we are raised as new creatures.

This gives each of us the ultimate motivation to cleanse our hearts of evil thoughts and intentions, to turn away from sin, and put our former ways of life behind us, so that we may be the salt of the earth and the light of the world Christ calls us to be.

Thanks be to God, through whom all things are possible. Amen.