North Kildonan United Church

5th February 2020 ~*Rev. Don Johnson*

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20 I Corinthians 3: 1-9 Matthew 5: 21-37

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

There are those times when it is important for us to remember that in our tradition we take Scripture seriously, not literally. Our gospel reading this day is precisely one of those times. The text is difficult to read and it is uncomfortable and confusing to hear. So there must be more to it than just what we find in today's verses. With that assumption in mind, the assumption that Jesus really doesn't want a bunch of one eyed, one handed, self-maimed terrified followers as examples of his gospel-after all, where is the Good News in that? I'm sure that's not what this passage is all about.

What then is Jesus saying to us in this part of the Sermon on the Mount? First of all, let's take a step back and think for a moment about the understanding of God we find in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

There are many concepts out there about God and many names for God. To some, God is a higher power, to others the Creator, to still others God is the passionless energy that keeps the universe ticking along- the Unmoved Mover is how some philosophers put it. The Greeks and Romans had a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses, as did the Vikings and other cultures and races. For many today, there is a belief in karma- what goes around comes around, if I have that expression correct-which basically means that if you do good, good will come to you, if you are mean and miserable, expect the world to treat you that way.

For the early Christians, the mythology of the Greeks was a strong and ugly concept to challenge and push against. St Paul was continually at odds with Greek thought, and for good reason. For the Greeks, gods and goddesses were bad news. Those deities treated humans as their playthings, and in Greek mythology, humans rarely if ever fared well. In their belief system, if a Greek were to see a god walking towards them, the only logical action was to hide, to not engage in polite conversation or offer to help or even to bow down and worship. In Greek mythology, a god was basically trouble to the Greeks, since the belief was that all bad things that happened in life were caused by the capricious actions of these deities.

So for the typical Greek of the day, the gospel of Jesus Christ made no sense at all. After all, Jesus called God Abba, father, and in the beginning of Matthew's gospel we find Jesus described as Emmanuel, translated as *God is with us.* And the God of the Old and New Testaments is not a fickle deity who abuses humans-no, God is love; God cares deeply and fully for creation and for all who are created by God. In Genesis we are told

that humans are created in the image of God, which speaks volumes about the sanctity and preciousness of human life. It was because of God's love for the world that Jesus Christ was sent to us, born of Mary, human as we are, living and dying as one of us. And for many of us, we believe that God's love extends beyond humans and embraces all living creatures. It was Karl Barth, the great theologian of the 20th century, who proposed that it is quite possible that God has his own covenant with the animals and all other non-humans who share this world with us. Such belief, taken seriously, has real implications for how we treat or mistreat animals. To look into the eyes of an animal and see dignity and worthiness and the creativity of God rather than a source of food or labour or something to control.

Jesus regularly referred to God as Father, and nowadays we rightly include Mother in that understanding of the first person of the Trinity. But the point is that if God is our divine parent, as Scripture and the Church's teachings suggest, then doesn't it make sense that God is concerned about our lives, our relationships and the choices we make?

Our passage from Deuteronomy puts it rather succinctly: *"today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live…"* Those words are attributed to Moses as he stands on the edge of the Promised Land, the land he cannot enter yet the people will enter, and make their new life in. But in a real sense, each of us, each day, we are presented with choices, choices that may bring wholeness or brokenness. Therefore choose life.

Jesus builds upon the teaching of Moses with today's passage. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus has come as the fulfillment of the Law, not the destroyer of the Law. It is common nowadays to see Jesus almost as a first century hippy, preaching about love and acceptance and putting down the authorities and breaking all the rules. But that is not really very accurate.

The entire vision of the Sermon on the Mount is based on an understanding of the character of God as revealed by Jesus, a God who is faithful and supremely caring about creation, a God who through Jesus reaches out to save. The Sermon is directed at those who wish to follow Christ, but not in a literal, wooden, inflexible way. The Sermon is meant to be part of a living tradition, open to exploration and reinterpretation. We see Jesus doing that in today's passage: *"You have heard it said you shall not murder, but I say to you if you are angry…*

You have heard it said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that everyone who looks with lust has already committed adultery…

It was also said: whoever divorces his wife, give her a certificate of divorce, but I say to you divorcing your wife causes her to commit adultery…

You have heard it said don't swear falsely, but I say don't swear at all."

All of us are in a variety of relationships, in our personal lives, in our church and social and work lives as well. And if the relationships will have any meaning and depth, they need to be based on firm foundations, on understandings of respect and love and forgiveness. To be in relationship with someone is to be able to depend upon that person, to be able to trust that the other has your best interests at heart, to be able to believe that what the other says is true and honest. Because God loves us and cares deeply and passionately about how we treat one another, God sent Jesus to show us the way. Because Jesus loves us, he teaches us about the nature of God's kingdom, the reality of faithful living and the place of the law in our lives.

One commentator writing on today's Gospel asks: "*What if God cares that we keep the law for our sake-not for the law's sake?"* He continues: *"Notice that each of these different injunctions concerns how we treat each other. Jesus doesn't just heighten the force of the law, he broadens it:*

It's not enough to just refrain from murder. We should also treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful words.

It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.

It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable-- in this culture that often meant women and children--are provided for.

It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all."

He continues: "*All the extremism of cutting off body parts and burning in hell serve to magnify just how important our relationships are to God. And I suspect this runs contrary to the way most of our folks think about God and God's laws much of the time. In fact, if you asked some passersby what they think of when they think about God, they would say (if they didn't run away from you first!) that God seems to them something like an old man, probably with white hair and a white beard, sitting up in heaven, looking down at us rather sternly and making sure no one is having too much fun. This picture of God is perhaps best caught by the secular hymn, "he knows when you are sleeping; he knows when you're awake; he knows when you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake!"*

Joy, love, respect, forgiveness, trust, these are the values of the Kingdom of God, these are gifts that enrich and bless our lives, gifts that enable us to embrace all the more fully the life God has given us.

In Deuteronomy, Moses taught the people*: "today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life."* Dear friends, may the life you choose be filled with joy and great blessings.

And this final thought from St Augustine: "O man, learn to dance, otherwise the angels in heaven will not know what to do with you." Amen.