

## **Epiphany 6 Year A,**

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

16<sup>h</sup> February, 2020

**Sirach 15:15-20 NRSV / Matthew 5:21-37 NRSV**

We have a lot of choices to make in our lives don't we?

From the moment we wake up each day until we go to sleep,  
our days abound in countless choices.

We choose when to get up, we choose what to eat,  
what clothes we will wear, whether to brush our teeth;  
the list goes on and on.

Now some of those choices are heavily influenced by other factors  
like what time we have to be at work or school,  
our nutritional requirements,  
and our relationship with our dentist  
and the social stigma of green teeth.

But the argument could be made that our lives are largely  
the results of the going series of choices we make.

Some have more impact on our lives than others.

The examples I mentioned a moment ago may not be so impactful,  
but who we choose to partner with, or if we choose a  
partner,  
the friends we choose,

where we choose to live;  
choices like these can have a tremendous impact  
on the overall arc of our lives, and the lives of others.

I'd like to start today with a little story.

King Henry II of England, back in around 1200 AD,  
had a lot of power.

He made the choice to work at putting an end to a long and bloody civil war,  
and he ruled both England and a large chunk of France for many years.

He was so famous that a movie was made about him  
starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole.

His choices resulted in him being regarded as a pretty good king.

But what made King Henry most famous

was a choice he made that resulted in the tragic murder of another.

He and a man who had once been his dearest friend,

Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury,

were locked in a life-and-death power struggle

between church and state.

And in a moment of great frustration, so it is said,

the King chose to vocalize his anger, crying out,

"Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest!"

and four of his more ambitious and unscrupulous henchmen

rode out that night to Canterbury

and murdered Thomas in front of the high altar of the cathedral.

After this horrific deed, King Henry chose to show his penance

by walking, barefoot and in sackcloth,

the more than 50 miles from London to Canterbury.

Which was of more concern to God,

the public display of penance,

or the lack of relationship that led to the poor choice?

That's some serious food for thought and the gist of the Jesus's message to us

in today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount.

In today's scripture, Jesus is going into detail

concerning commandments and laws

that were the topic of debate

among the Pharisees and scholars of his day.

It's a continuation of the text that started with the Beatitudes

and identified the ideals of the Kingdom to come,

the expectation that we are to choose to live lives of righteousness and integrity,

to earn our place in the Kingdom,

and that his revelation that he has come to fulfill, or clarify

the deeper meaning of the commandments and the laws.

So today we begin to examine the next section of his sermon,

called the antitheses,

because each paragraph starts out with a contrasting statement,

“you have heard it said...but I say...”

Now these issues are some pretty serious and controversial ones  
even in our culture today.

But what's important, and what Christ indirectly illustrates,

is that these laws are meant to prevent

the outward sign of an inward problem.

Murder is a symptom of the greater problem

of unresolved anger and personal conflict.

Adultery is a symptom of improper values,

which you could argue stem from greed and self-indulgence.

Divorce is the outward sign of issues in personal relationships,

sometimes sharing its roots with those of adultery.

And needing to verify the truth of your statements with an oath

suggests that some of your statements are more true than others,

which relates a lack of integrity and personal ethics.

To boil it all down, it's about integrity and positive relationships.

All the issues raised stem from a failure to live with integrity,

and a failure to participate equally with compassion in relationships with others.

It's about being in right relationship with God, and in right relationship with each other.

Noted theologian and author Brian McLaren,

in his book “The Secret Message of Jesus,”

summarizes this, saying,

“In each case, conventional religious morality  
(the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees)

is about *not doing external wrong*:

not murdering, not committing adultery,  
not committing divorce, not breaking sacred oaths.

But the kingdom manifesto calls us beyond and beneath  
this kind of morality;

we must deal with greed and lust,  
arrogance and prejudice in the heart.

And more, instead of merely not doing wrong,

with a changed heart we will be motivated to do what is right.

And that is the hard work.

Many of us have enough self-control to avoid the actual outward acts,  
but the internal work is where the rubber really meets the road.

How do we avoid having lust?

What can we do to avoid the greed that leads to wanting more?

How can we let go of our anger and bitterness towards another?

Michael Hardin, in his book “The Jesus Driven Life,” tells us,

“the way of the Kingdom of God

means that the way we relate to everyone changes.

Not just our friends, but also those we despise

and those who can't stand us. It is not easy to love the unlovely.

When we are attacked, we attack back,  
when we are threatened, we threaten.

Our natural posture is defensiveness.

This is true not only on a personal level but also on a political one.

Have you ever noticed that when someone attacks you

it is always unjust but when you attack another it is always just?

When you get angry the first thing you do

is to have this sort of inane conversation in your head.

They said this, I will say that,

they will respond thus, I will have that response, etc.

Notice how you always win this mental battle!

Think about the current political discourse in our country.

It's all about my cause versus your cause,

My point of view versus yours,

me vs. you.

But Jesus says that the Christian life does not consist of these mental battles.

Instead we are to choose to make peace in every way

for Blessed are the peacemakers.

More than that, choosing retaliation

is not an aspect of Christian existence,

as we will see in next week's scripture.

When Christians are hassled or persecuted,

it is not part of their calling to get them back.

Christianity is not a gang where if one member

is suffering at the hands of rivals,

it sends out its members to get the other gang.

Instead we are called to choose to love our enemies and

seek reconciliation..

This way of choosing to focus on our relationship with others

also extends to the way we understand our sexuality.

Jesus admonitions on adultery and divorce are made to men primarily

because in his time males were at the top of the gender hierarchy.

We need to take into account the historical context

in Christ's admonitions concerning divorce.

It's less the actual legal and physical separation

and more the consequences that act had

for the wife in the relationship.

In the male-focused culture of ancient Palestine, if a woman was divorced,

in order to survive, she had to immediately remarry,

or be able to return to the house of her father or a brother.

If those options weren't available, she would be homeless and destitute.

Much of the debate at the time focused on those men who divorced frivolously,

and put their spouse at real risk.

Jesus clear call to resist lust

has as much to say today as it did then.

The actual act is the symptom.

It's what goes on in the mind that's the problem.

It's a choice based on self-indulgence and greed.

Again, it all gets back to choosing right relationships and integrity,

to not being satisfied with what you have, to always wanting more.

These laws are more about the state of your heart

and the content of your character.

So how can we combat these thoughts and impulses?

A large portion of it comes down to simplicity,

to choosing to be satisfied with enough,

instead of never having enough to be satisfied.

It's choosing to step away from me versus them

and instead choosing to see us.

It's making the conscious choice to seek common ground

and step into another's shoes to really understand their point of view.

We may still disagree but it's choosing to assign value to another's perspective.

It all gets back to relationships.

When we choose to let anger and self-interest take over,

when it becomes us vs. them,

we automatically place our perspective and position

over the opposition.

We devalue their position, and by inference,  
we devalue them as individuals,  
because we don't value their outlook  
and we consider their comprehensive skills  
to be inferior to our own.

And when we've dehumanized someone,  
that's when we make it possible to resort to violence,  
whether verbal or physical.

It's about respect and valuing one another.

And that respect and value carries over into all the issues from today's scripture.

Then there's the issue of integrity.

The ancient laws referenced concerning oaths stress the imperative  
to observe sacred oaths that one makes.

I'd like to share with you a humorous little story I came across this week  
about taking vows.

A businessman was traveling on a plane for the first time.

He had always been terrified of flying  
but his next appointment required him to do so.

The flight was going well when suddenly the plane shuddered.

The pilot came over the intercom and announced  
that the engines on the right side had stopped  
so they were making an emergency landing.

Shortly there after, another shudder and the pilot announced  
that the other engines had stopped.

Everyone was informed to assume the crash position  
with their head between their knees.

For the first time the businessman felt vulnerable.

He had never felt the need to cry out to God but at that moment he did.

“God,” he prayed. “ If you will allow me to survive this crash

I take a solemn vow to give to charity half of all my possessions.”

Suddenly all four engines began working again

and the plane glided smoothly onto the runway.

The businessman rushed to disembark.

As he made his way out of the runway area

the man who had been seated beside him spoke to him.

“Excuse me sir. I am a pastor involved in several charities.

I heard your vow to the Lord concerning your possessions.

I can guide you in keeping that vow

by recommending some outstanding charities

that have needs.”

The businessman replied “That won’t be necessary.

You see I made a new vow with God.

I vowed if I ever got on another plane, He could have it all.”

That story amusedly highlights how little value vows can be.

But Jesus argues that oaths should not even be necessary.

If you have integrity, why should what you say need to be verified  
to be more truthful sometimes than others.

We should all speak the truth,  
because saying anything else again demonstrates disrespect  
to those we are deceiving.

We are indicating that they aren't worthy enough for us  
to be honest and straightforward with,  
that we can "get away" with lying to them.

Again we are casting reflections on their worth,  
their value as fellow human beings.

And if we can't make the choice to be in right relationships with our sisters and brothers,  
how can we be in right relationship with our Creator?

How can we be worthy to participate in the modern equivalents of altar sacrifices today?

I'd like to close today with a quote from German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Preached as a confirmation sermon in 1938,

Bonhoeffer addressed a group of young people  
whose world seemed to be falling apart into chaos,  
which isn't such a far cry  
from where many of us find ourselves today.

He reflects on us honoring our commitment,

our "yes" meaning yes and our "no" meaning no,

"You have only one master now," he says,

    "...But with this 'yes' to God belongs just as clear a 'no.'

Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustice, to all evil,

    to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor,

    to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy.

Your 'yes' to God requires a 'no' to everything

    that tries to interfere with your serving God alone,

        even if that is your job, your possessions,

        your home, or your honour in the world.

Belief means decision."

In other words, we have a choice to make.

Do we choose a right relationship with God,

    which entails right relationships with each other;

or do we choose our own way.

The choice is clear. I pray we all choose wisely. Amen.