

Worship Service “*The Right Choice*”

Epiphany 6, Year A, 12th February, 2023

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

Prelude

Opening Music (Video) [Red Letters](#) dc Talk

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Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *Holy Spirit, Come With Power* 26

Call to Worship [responsive]

One: Happy are those whose way is blameless.

All: Blessed are those who walk in the law of the Lord.

One: Happy are those who keep God's decrees.

All: Blessed are those who seek God with their whole heart.

One: God has commanded that his precepts be kept diligently.

All: We pray that we may be faithful in keeping all his statutes.

One: If we pay attention to all his commands we will not be put to shame.

All: As we learn God's righteous judgments, we will praise God with an upright heart.

Invocation

Most Loving and Gracious God, we praise you and we thank you for the guidance that you give us from day to day in your Word and by your Spirit. We thank you for choosing to dwell among us and praise you for calling us to be your faithful people.

Bless this time of worship and of prayer, that those who need comfort may be comforted, those who need challenge may be challenged, and that all of us may grow closer together as your children—as members of the body of Christ Jesus our Risen Lord, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

Apocryphal Reading

Sirach 15:15-20 NRSV

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

He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.

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

For great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything; his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every human action.

He has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and he has not given anyone permission to sin.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Glorious God,
you set before us commandments that affect our very lives. We can only obey you by loving you above all others. Give us the will and the skill to love you with all of our hearts, minds and strength.

Lord Jesus,
we know we are too often mere infants in the faith. We argue over big things and little things, and justify our points of view as faith. Forgive us when we do this and fail to remember that our growth in the faith is a matter of being your servant, working together with all other servants, in this world which is your mission field.

Holy Spirit,
help us understand the hard teachings of Jesus about anger, name calling, bearing false witness, fidelity and marriage. Even before we come to understand, give us the strength to obey.

We bring before you the needs of all countries and communities who seek to care for one another. Help us to not merely rely upon governments for justice, but to seek and do justice in our own daily lives.

We look forward to the coming of spring and the flowering of the earth from her winter's sleep. Renew us also, that we may bloom like flowers, ready to bring beauty to one another.

For those among us who need care, help us be the caregivers. When we name their names before you in prayer. Make all our petitions selfless, that we may reflect your light for all to see and find comfort in. Amen.

Hymn

My Hope is Built on Nothing Less (V. 1-4) - 343

Gospel Reading: **Matthew 5:21-37 CJB**

“You have heard that our fathers were told, ‘**Do not murder,**’ and that anyone who commits murder will be subject to judgment.

But I tell you that anyone who nurses anger against his brother will be subject to judgment; that whoever calls his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing!’ will be brought before the *Sanhedrin*; that whoever says, ‘Fool!’ incurs the penalty of burning in the fire of Gei-Hinnom!

So if you are offering your gift at the Temple altar and you remember there that your brother has something against you,

leave your gift where it is by the altar, and go, make peace with your brother. Then come back and offer your gift.

If someone sues you, come to terms with him quickly, while you and he are on the way to court; or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer of the court, and you may be thrown in jail!

Yes indeed! I tell you, you will certainly not get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that our fathers were told, ‘**Do not commit adultery.**’

But I tell you that a man who even looks at a woman with the purpose of lusting after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If your right eye makes you sin, gouge it out and throw it away! Better that you should lose one part of you than have your whole body thrown into Gei-Hinnom.

And if your right hand makes you sin, cut it off and throw it away! Better that you should lose one part of you than have your whole body thrown into Gei-Hinnom.

“It was said, ‘**Whoever divorces his wife must give her a *get*.**’

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and that anyone who marries a divorcee commits adultery.

“Again, you have heard that our fathers were told, ‘**Do not break your oath,**’ and ‘**Keep your vows to *Adonai*.**’

But I tell you not to swear at all — not ‘by **heaven,**’ because it is God’s **throne**;

not ‘by **the earth,**’ because it is his **footstool**; and not ‘by Yerushalayim,’ because it is **the city of the Great King.**

And don't swear by your head, because you can't make a single hair white or black.

Just let your 'Yes' be a simple 'Yes,' and your 'No' a simple 'No'; anything more than this has its origin in evil.

Message - *The Right Choice*

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 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.

Reflecting on that story, what do you think would have been 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 Kin-dom, 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 to 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 the right relationship with God, and in the 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 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 thereafter, 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 that if I ever got on another plane, He could have it all."

That story amusingly highlights how little value vows can be worth. 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 honor 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.

A Call to Serve

Give away yourself and your resources, so you can grow. Give away your beauty and your energy, so your neighbor can grow. Give away your love and hope, so that this church can grow. Give, as you have been given.

A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude*

Prayer of Thanksgiving

These gifts are our fruit, O God of all fields. Each giver has made the choice between life and death, blessings and Curses. We choose blessing. We choose life.

May God's promises be fulfilled through the harvest of God's garden in these our gifts

HYMN *Take My Life* 389

Benediction

God has placed before you life & death, blessings & curses. Therefore choose life, follow God's way. Go now, and be a people of reconciliation and integrity. Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" "no".

And in all the paths you walk may God hold you steady and close. May Christ Jesus bless you and every place you enter. And may the Spirit give you length of days and fullness of life. We go in peace to love and serve the Lord, ...In the name of Christ.

Amen.

Postlude