

Epiphany 6 – Year A  
Matthew 5:21-37  
Feb. 16, 2020  
*If/then*

*If/then.* Make a choice. Life and prosperity, death and adversity. Obedience or curses. “*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.*” Moses uses two “if/thens”. Jesus uses six “ifs” coupled with hard, stern consequences.

This imagery starkly contrasts with the grace-filled blessings – the Beatitudes– in the immediately preceding passage in Matthew.

*‘If, then.’*

Not the warm and fuzzy imagery through which we prefer to encounter the presence of God. The harshness of the words alone should cause us to pay attention, to pause and be thoughtful.

*‘If, then.’*

At the center of today’s Gospel is transformation: the transformation of the law-abiding Jewish Christian into the spirit-formed person who follows the Way of Christ. Rules for maintaining our relationship with our neighbor, how we hold together as a people, are laid over the Ten Commandments, not in opposition. Jesus challenges us to probe our motivations and actions.

The letter of the law is important, but not enough.

All families have “rules”, sometimes verbalized, sometimes not. I asked my husband Dale what some of the rules were in his family when he was growing up. His answer was, just one – listen to Mother. He paused, and added, don’t argue with your sisters [Dale grew up with two sisters and one brother]. Eat dinner together and do not leave the table until everyone is finished. Go to church every Sunday, and wear your Sunday clothes all day. That Sunday part was more what they just did, an un verbalized rule.

My own family rules. Listen to Dad. Eat dinner together, no one leaves the table until all are finished. Address non-family adults as Mr. or Mrs. The rule in my family about arguing was unspoken: work it out yourselves.

These are relational rules, how the family gets along, shares the family bond. Rules set out by a loving parent. The implied ‘*if/then*’ is not threat or judgment; the consequences are obvious, relationships go awry.

In a dysfunctional family, the spoken and unspoken rules of respect and relationship either aren’t

there, or aren't followed.

In Deuteronomy, the Israelites have arrived at the destination God has prepared for them. Moses' commands are laid out "*so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors.*" *Because* God loves you. Loving parent to child. Here is how to hold together as a people in this foreign land. You will perish if you bow down to other gods. That is not a threat, that is a reality. Choose life with God.

*If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God... then you shall live and become numerous, then the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ... and if your heart turns away, [then] you shall perish.*

The divine will is that God's people live and prosper: the *because/therefore* on which the Ten Commandments rest.

Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments as one, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Mt. 22:38.

In today's Gospel, Jesus instructs us to serve the spirit and intention of the law.

"*But I say to you,*" is not a denial, or the herald of a technical qualification. Jesus is not imparting information – he is drawing us into a particular way of life, the community to which Jesus calls us.

'Let your word be yes, yes or no, no.' Oaths are a fact of life in the Old Testament stories. You don't need oaths, or to swear to tell the truth, if you always *tell* the truth. Your word – your yes or no--should be as dependable as the solemn oaths of others.

Anger is human – Jesus is angry when he overturns the tables in the temple courtyard. The problem is holding on to anger. Express your anger in a responsible way, and then let it go, because festering anger leads to thoughts of revenge. Anger escalates, even to murder.

Free-floating rage. Mass shootings. I wonder, what are those shooters angry about? Their anger is not focused on someone in particular (though it probably starts out that way), but at a systemic problem or a segment of society. Do we have blinders on? We don't wonder about their anger, we excuse *ourselves* when we point only to *their* mental instability. It is not enough to control weapons sales and offer mental health care.

*If* we follow Jesus' teaching, *then* there should be no room for anger, insult or name-calling – no room for behaviors that insidiously chip away at relationship and community. Community happens between people. How we hold together as a people is important.

In that context, consider Jesus' instruction about divorce. Adultery was a less inclusive term in

Jesus' time, and was defined by whether the *woman* involved had a living husband. It was tied up in the oppressive belief that a wife was her husband's 'property.' A husband could divorce his wife, but not the other way around. A far different view of marriage than today.

Jesus' point is this: divorce fractures our connectedness, fractures relationships of family and friends and worshipping community. In the Episcopal tradition, couples contemplating marriage and couples contemplating divorce are urged to seek the counsel of their priest.

As Paul recognizes, we "behave according to human inclinations." Jesus sets before us a demanding ethic of community relationship, and we often fall short.

I wonder, would we prefer to live as though God were not so attentive to the choices we make?

The negative consequences are threatening, unpleasant, even dire. I hear these as consequences of our own making. Both 'if' and 'then' are about what *we* do for and to ourselves and each other. The consequences are 'on us.' As Moses says, we get to choose.

A serious question: Does "*If/then*" invite us to serve a transactional God? A God who keeps a score card, or some sort of cosmic bank account?

*If* we do good, *then* God is with us. *If* we don't obey, *then* we get punished. Life is about figuring out how to get rewarded. *If* we pay God with right thinking, right beliefs, *then* God is good to us. I hear versions of the transactional *if/then* in my chaplain work [I got diabetes because I am a bad person] I hear that in the prosperity gospel [amassing wealth through prayer]. I hear it when people say that the bad things that happen, or prayers that seem to go unanswered, are a consequence imposed, a judgment from God.

Can we really manipulate God to get what we want out of God? To me, everything about that spiritual vision of a transactional God is wrong. Tempting, though – because if God obeys the rules-- the *if/then* -- then we can predict God's benevolence, deposit more prayers in times of need and 'voila!' life achieves a certainty.

One writer calls this our 'default' idea about God – this God who can be bought and sold. We come up with our own ideas about who God is, we formulate the rules God has to obey, and then we worship that image of God. Idolatry, yes?

There is one more *If/then* in today's Gospel. Jesus says, '*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.*'

Remember the historical (1890) service here a few weeks ago? Jesus' words in Matthew are the source of that opening exhortation to be reconciled to your neighbor *before* you approach the

altar.

Damaged relationships need mending. We need the reality of forgiveness, the knowledge that we have been forgiven. We must forgive those with whom we are in conflict.

I wonder, though. Do forgiveness, reconciliation happen ‘on command’ because it is Sunday and we want to partake of the Eucharistic feast? Juxtaposed against admission to participate in the Eucharist, the old Prayer Book exhortation denies the power that worshiping together brings into our lives.

I believe that forgiveness happens because Christ is working through us. “I will, with God’s help,” we say in the baptismal promises. To imagine we do everything on our own disconnects us from the power of God’s grace.

At the Eucharist, we offer ourselves to God, the totality of our lives – the darkness and the good. And all are invited to the altar. All sorts and conditions of people come into the communion, the unifying experience of the bread and the wine, for we are all one body. Transformation in worship.

The Didache summarizes some of my thoughts today. The Didache is an early Christian ‘training manual’, dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Scholars have long seen similarities of image, words and phrases with the Gospel of Matthew. Likely, both came out of the same sort of community, that is a Jewish Christian community, rather than a gentile Christian community.

Much like the *if/then* scripture we read today, the Didache starkly portrays the difference between the way of life and the way of death. The Didache concludes: “*if you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you are not able to do this, do what you are able.*”

God is already and always present. *If/then* is not about fearsome consequences, it is about our commitment to living in the community of God.

A concluding question.

If you are asked, *What does our relationship with our neighbor have to do with our worship of God?* How would you respond?

The Rev. Diane Ramerman  
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