

Grace Will See Us Through

We celebrate Valentine's Day this week. So even though today's scripture lesson touches on some uncomfortable and even personal topics, the overall theme of the text is relationships. Jesus is peeling away layers of tradition and getting right down to the core of his teaching. The first basic principle Jesus deals with is anger.

The presenting issue is murder but the underlying cause that Jesus wants us to get a handle on is anger. When we get angry enough to call someone names, we are playing with fire that could lead to death. Before God will honor our gift at His altar we need to make sure that our hearts are free of any grudges or underlying ill will being held against someone. Jesus even flips it and says if we know that we have caused hurt in someone we need to go that person and try to make peace. We need to try to avoid adversarial confrontations. Remember the Beatitudes tell us that it is peacemakers who are blessed and are called the children of God. Jesus wants us to become people who don't kill not because it is illegal but because we are motivated to find peace.

The next two topics or presenting issues are adultery and divorce. Jesus is not so much concerned about the laws regarding adultery and divorce as he is with revealing the root cause. How do we think about other people? Are we objectifying them in some way? Have we lost a sense of the sacred value of the marriage relationship? Would you be willing to give your right arm to save your marriage? How much of a personal sacrifice are you willing to make to keep

your relationship whole? I must admit that I am uncomfortable with this subject because of my own history but Jesus wants to be involved in our whole life not just the public parts but the private stuff too. Thinking about the scripture, Jesus uses imperatives. Pluck out your eye. Cut off your arm. While those seem, extreme I think what Jesus really wants us to consider is personal sacrifice. What are we willing to give up of ourselves to have a good relationship with our spouse, our friend, our siblings, and even more importantly, what will we give up to have a right relationship with God? What did God give up to have a relationship with us? He gave up His son.

The final subject that Jesus wants us to consider is honesty or in this case dishonesty. Jesus refers to a saying about making a false pledge. When someone makes a pledge, or takes an oath and then fails to live up to it, we become liars. Unfortunately, I believe we live in an age when dishonesty is normal. People swear to tell the truth, and then they blatantly lie, whether in court, in politics, in the media, or even in communities of faith. A man's word is no longer assumed to be his bond.

So, the presenting issue is the breaking of an oath but the underlying cause is dishonesty and lack of character. If we are not honest ourselves, how can we expect others to be honest with us? If we accept lies as truth and judge truth as lies, what happens to our ability to know the difference? What happens to society when telling the truth is no longer an expectation? What happens when we start to act as if there is no objective

truth, no objective right or wrong, and no trust that people will honor their promises?

What Jesus is saying to his followers and to us is that we need to think about our character by concentrating on our roots. Discipleship is less a matter of what we do as it is a matter of who we are. We need to pay close attention to what is on the inside, on our thoughts and our feelings, on what is deep inside our hearts. Once we do this, and if we all do this, then murder, adultery, divorce, and other dishonorable and harmful acts will take care of themselves.

The good news is God knows we can't do *this* perfectly. We can try, and we can pray, and we can work on healing our anger through reconciliation, and we can work on our relationships by doing unto others as we would have them do unto us, and we can work on honoring our commitments. We can work on our spiritual selves. But we will surely be working on it for all our lives and continuing to make mistakes. But we need not worry. This is not the end of us because, as John Wesley put it, we are going on to perfection when our righteousness will be abounding, exceeding even that of the scribes and the Pharisees. And in the meantime, there is grace enough to carry us along, despite our human failure. Praise be to God for grace in Jesus Christ.