

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Matthew 5:21-37 *Of Bathrooms and Other Misunderstandings*

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At a clergy lunch on Thursday, Pastor Patti, Pastor Jonathan, and I got on the topic of song lyrics, particularly song lyrics that we thought said one thing only to learn, later in life, that we were mistaken and they said something else all together.

For instance, when I was in first grade and Olivia Newton John's song *Physical* was number one on the Billboard chart I thought the song was called *Serious* and that the lyrics were "I wanna get serious. Serious. I wanna get serious. Come on let's get serious." (I was a total Debbie Downer in first grade.) Pastor Jonathan thought there was a lyric in Paul Simon's *Fifty Ways to Lose a Lover* that said, "Don't need to disgust Muss" as in there was no reason to be making a man named Muss feel disgusted. The real lyric is "Don't need to discuss much." And Pastor Patti thought Creedence Clear Water Revival was singing "There's a bathroom on the right" instead of "There's a bad moon on the rise."

And, it doesn't just happen with songs. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations happen all of the time. When my cousin and I were young we were saying the Lord's Prayer together at my grandma's and he started, "Our Father, who aren't in heaven." I chalked it up to him being an Episcopalian from Indianapolis. When Nathan was three or four we were standing in line at Tom's West Bay and he wanted some candy. He held up a package asking, "Mommy, is this a choking lizard." Apparently every time I said "choking hazard" he heard "choking lizard." I'm sure most of you have similar stories.

Indeed, regardless of our age, sometimes what we think we are hearing or understanding isn't what is being said, or what someone is actually trying to communicate. Indeed, it's nothing new, our scripture this morning reveals that it was happening in the time of Jesus. This morning's scripture passage is all about Jesus setting people straight on what they thought they had heard as opposed to what was actually being said—not in song lyrics or conversation but in the laws of the Jewish people.

We heard Jay repeat the formula Jesus uses to drive his point home four times . . . "You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you." In all four examples—murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths or promises—the "you have heard that is was said" items have to do with outward, observable behaviors, sinful kinds of behaviors that might be the subject of local gossip or read about in the paper. Obviously these things are wrong—not just in civil society but also, and more importantly, in a community that seeks to live according to the will and ways of God.

But, while civil society and the legal system judge us based on our behaviors, Jesus uses this "You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you" formula to get not just at behaviors, because those are important to Jesus, but also to enlighten his listeners to the emotions, feelings, and impulses behind the behaviors, suggesting that these, too, matter in the Kingdom of God and, when necessary need to be corrected.

This deeper reality—what we might think of as the condition of our hearts and souls—are what the "but I tell" statements are all about. These are the kinds of thoughts, feelings, and emotions we experience that we can often hide from others. After all, we're not going to read our name in *The Leelanau Enterprise* for getting angry with our neighbor or lusting after our colleague's spouse. And yet these thoughts, feelings, and emotions matter because they create stumbling blocks for us in our relationships with one another and with God. Sometimes we think we're doing okay if we don't act on our feelings, but Jesus is saying something different here.

Amy Ogen, a church history professor at St. Paul School of Theology in Oklahoma City, described it in a way that really resonates with me. *Perhaps one of the most radical aspects of Jesus' extension of the law here is his internalization of it, so that not only behaviors, but attitudes and emotions fall within its scope. Of course, this*

is not new to Jewish thinking. Throughout Hebrew Scriptures, the law is to be taken to heart and not only outwardly observed. Jesus connects the dots for his listeners from outward acts to internal orientation, from murder to anger, from adultery to lust. It is one thing to behave rightly. It is another thing entirely for one's heart to be oriented toward love. . . . [He knows it] is easier to keep the commandment against murder than it is to avoid anger in one's heart.

Jesus offers a more radical ethic, a reign of God ethic, one already hinted at in the list of beatitudes preceding this discourse. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the pure in heart—all of these are blessed not because they are exemplars of the law, [not because of their behavior] but because of their inward orientations of heart. The righteousness of this newly inaugurated kingdom of God is more than following rules. It requires and empowers a life surrendered to God and neighbor.¹

I love her choice of words “the inward orientation of the heart.” That’s what Jesus promotes in his followers, a transformation of the inward orientation of the heart. It’s so much more than just being good. It’s about sanctification which is a fifty cent seminary word that means becoming more holy, becoming more like Christ. Surely when the inward orientation of our heart it towards love, we become more holy.

I am reminded of an interaction I had with a mom of a middle school boy living in our town when I was serving a church in Rhode Island. She came to me one day and told me she wanted her son to start coming to our Sunday School because he had begun getting into a lot of trouble and then was lying about it. She wanted our Sunday School teacher to teach her son how to behave. I felt so sorry for that mom, she was at the end of her rope with her son, desperate to try anything to get him to behave. But that boy knew how to behave, he had behaved just fine until a few months before that. He knew the difference between right and wrong, otherwise he wouldn’t have been lying about the wrong he did. The issues at hand went far deeper than behavior, the issues had to do with the inward orientation of his heart.

In the weeks and months that followed we would learn that the boy’s behavior issues did not stem from a lack of knowledge of right and wrong. He knew the difference between right and wrong, he knew the rules. He didn’t need our church to teach him that. The issue behind his outlandish behavior had to do with the inward orientation of his heart. In time it came out that a good friend of his had died in a tragic accident and he needed someone to listen to him talk about how he felt about what had happened. The adults in his life had tried to shield him from the harsh realities of the accident by not talking about it but that’s not what he needed. He wanted to hear about it, to talk about it, and to have his young, broken, aching heart tended to by people who loved him. The grief and anger he felt in the wake of the accident caused his heart to lose its orientation and he needed some folks who loved him to journey with him in his grief. And, as is often the case for kids, and adults, whose hearts are aching, he sought attention any way he could get it—even when that involved behaving in ways he knew were wrong. That boy needed love, not law. He needed faith that God and others cared about him in his struggle, he didn’t need us to preach at him about the consequences of what would happen if he didn’t shape up.

Indeed, I don’t think any of us are here today to learn the difference between right and wrong. None of you needed reminding that murder, adultery, divorce, and lying are wrong in the eyes of the Lord when you walked through those doors. Y’all know those things. I also don’t think any of us are here today because we don’t already know how to improve our behavior. Indeed, if we need refresher courses on good manners and proper behavior we could have just stayed home in our pajamas and Googled Miss Manners, her articles about appropriate behavior are archived on the website of *The Washington Post*.

Rather, I’m guessing that most of us are here because we’re engaged in this lifelong process of sanctification, we want to follow in the way of Christ and become more holy, we want to be more like Jesus, and so we come

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=795

here to be reminded of what a holy life looks like and sounds like and feels like. Much to the contrary of what a lot of people out there say about the church . . . You have heard it said that the church is a place for self-righteous, judgy, do-gooders . . . But I tell you, the church is a place where, while we strive for good behavior, we also value the orientation of our hearts and the hearts of one another. I tell you, the church, or at least this church, is committed to being a community in which people's hearts get reoriented towards love week after week, month after month, year after year.

The way I look at it, we've got this one precious hour a week during which we get a chance to reorient our hearts towards love—together. Sure, throughout the week we have other opportunities through service, prayer, Bible study, and meditation to constantly tweak our hearts towards love. But also, during the week, the news, the gossips, and the Lord only knows who or what else are trying to pull our hearts towards fear and suspicion, trying to pull our hearts towards greed and gain. But here, something special happens here when we're all together.

We don't all believe the same things or behave the same ways or have the same experiences, we often misunderstand or misinterpret one another . . . but we have this more important thing in common, this deep desire to reorient our hearts towards love . . . to be reshaped, renewed, and restored by the love of God we find in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.