

Be Real (#6 in Be Attitudes Series) **Matthew 5:[20] 21-30**
Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV **6th Sunday After the Epiphany**
(February 12,) 2017

Matthew 5: 20-30 (ESV)

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Let me begin with a story. Then I’ll look at today’s scripture to explain the story. Then I hope that this scripture will come alive to you, as Jesus anticipated. For this scripture is intended, as the Apostle Paul said: **to show us the truth, expose our rebellion, correct our mistakes, and train us to live God’s way ... to put [us] together and shape us for the tasks God has for us.** (2 Timothy 3:16-17[*The Message*])

The Story: John and Sally got married, in the way that many young people do. They met with the preacher, they got all prettied up, they went into the church to profess their intentions to live together until death do them part. And they meant every single word of what they said. There was one part of the wedding service, where the preacher took the two wedding rings from the hand of the Best Man and held them up into the air, and told the congregation: These rings are the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, signifying to us the union between Jesus Christ and His Church, and signifying to

all the uniting of Sally and John in holy marriage. Let us pray: Bless, O Lord, the giving of these rings, that they who wear them may live in your peace and continue in your favor all the days of their life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

And John and Sally set out on their “until death do us part” marriage happily. Until, one night, while he was on a business trip out of town, John made a terrible mistake. Later, Sally would try to figure out what was the cause of that fateful night. But, suffice it to say, John committed adultery. And it did not stop there. Pretty soon, it became an “every-trip-out-of-town-thing.” And then, it wasn’t just when he went out of town.

When the ugliness became exposed, Sally was devastated. They tried marriage counseling for awhile. John said that he really did want to fix their marriage. At some point in the counseling, what was going through John’s mind when he was unfaithful came up for discussion. And he said, “I didn’t really think it would hurt. I ALWAYS took off my wedding ring when I did it. The preacher said that we would live in peace and God’s favor so long as we wore them. So I always took it off, whenever I committed adultery. I thought the blessing by the preaching would hold us together, so long as I wore the ring.

I’ll come back to this story, in a few moments, and explain.

Those of you who were here last week might remember that in this sermon series on the “BE” attitudes, we began to merge from BE into DO – and you were encouraged to look for times when you saw ACTION – Doing – that demonstrated the Kingdom of Heaven inbreaking into your daily life.

Actually, this whole sermon series on BE has been grounded in the teaching with which Jesus began in His first public Sermon in Matthew: **TURN AROUND. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.** And, at the risk of appearing too repetitive to those who have been here every Sunday, it’s still important for me to begin each sermon exposition on that theme with the fundamentally important principle: It’s **NOT** about pie-in-the-sky-in-the-sweet-by-and-bye. **It’s NOT about buying fire insurance for after**

you die. Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of Heaven that co-exists with our KINGDOM OF FIVE SENSES – a realm which, unfortunately, is the only part of life that some people pay any attention to. More than Personal Salvation, more than ANYTHING ELSE in ALL THE GOSPELS Jesus was trying to awake the people then, and us today, to this KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND.

Now, I apologize that I was behind the 8-Ball this week. When the bulletin was printed on Thursday, I had only included in the Gospel reading for today, the verses that were assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary. This is a difficult scripture upon which to preach, and I suspect that some of the difficulty comes about because the verse preceding today's reading was not included. One benefit of the Lectionary is that it requires the preacher to preach from the scripture (as opposed to picking an idea out of the air and then trying to find some scripture that supports that idea.) One danger of the Lectionary is a possibility that the particular passage is read in isolation – away from the verses that come before and after it. Today's scripture was such a case for me, when the bulletin was prepared.

Hear the 20th verse – the one that sets up what I believe today's scripture passage is all about:

20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Judaism was, at least at the time of Jesus, largely a religion focusing on **THE EXTERNALS**. And THAT was the problem Jesus was addressing.

You see, God's Fundamental Purpose, revealed in scripture from Genesis through Revelation is all about:

- RE-UNIFICATION.
- Reconciliation.

- Joining together the Creator and the Creature, made in the Creator's image.
- Taking the Chip off the ol' block and returning it to where it fits.

When we TURN AROUND and live together in THIS KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, right here at hand, we share in a place where God meant for us to share all along.

And when we are able to do so, on THIS SIDE OF THE GRAVE, we are able to experience peace and power unlike anything we can experience outside the Kingdom of Heaven.

- All of the healing.
- All of the loving.
- All of the things that Jesus did, and
- (as He told His disciples and us) “[you] will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will [you] do.” (John 14:12)

But NOT SO **unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, ...** who thought it was all about external religion – SIMPLY GOOD BEHAVIOR. To these folks Jesus said:

Jesus was trying to get the people who had been educated: It's time to **wake up and to GET REAL.**

- If you think you can harbor bad thoughts about people whom God loves and you're OK so long as you don't kill them
- If you think you can desire to break the holy covenant of marriage in your heart and you're OK so long as take off your wedding band, or don't actually “physically cheat“
- If you think you can ask God for forgiveness and make a nice offering, but don't actually work to reconcile your damaged relationship

THEN, you need to hear in today's scripture Jesus saying, **YOU ARE SERIOUSLY DELUSIONAL. DUDE; GET REAL!**

Jesus used some pretty powerful HYPERBOLE (cutting off hands and putting out eyes) to make sure we understand how important this is. **And God help the Biblical literalists here!**

But, there is also a kernel of truth in the hyperbole – for, if you live in the fantasy world where all that matters is what people see on the outside, then it won't be too long before **YOU will not be able to see** what darkness lurks within you. All you will be able to see is your pretty outside, and not the ugliness within. You really can **lose your vision**.

- **Anger**, itself, is not sinful. It is an early warning system to tell you something is wrong. Don't just cut off your external violence. Figure out what is going on. And deal with it, or you will lost contact with the Kingdom of Heaven at hand.
- Even Saint Jimmy Carter told us that he was subject to times of **lusting**. But, he wasn't content to simply not commit adultery. It **was a warning: something was wrong**. Figure out what is going on. And deal with it, or you will lose contact with the Kingdom of Heaven at hand.
- A **broken relationship with any person whom God loves as much as you**, can happen. But, **it's a warning sign: You have set higher standards than God has**. As one saint put it: **Some people whose hearts are hardened by judgmentalism will find a way to turn grace into self-righteousness**. Deal with this, or you will lose contact with the Kingdom of Heaven.

There is NOTHING Jesus wants more than for your heart and my heart to be joined with His, to experience the Kingdom of Heaven at hand. Simply acting nice is not enough. We need to Love of God in our hearts.

When we have bad urges, it's a warning. Don't PRETEND to be a saint. BE REAL. We need to admit we have an issue and deal with it. Otherwise, we are as far off the mark as the John in our story, who thought his adultery was just fine, so long as he took off his wedding ring.

BE REAL. So you really can Be blessed.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.