

Feelings matter – Outcomes more

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 16 February, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Epiphany 6A

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5: 21-37

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Uj441qwjMM>

Almost invariably, with reference to the ancient texts of the Hebrews and the wonderful Psalms and proverbs that come from the wisdom sayings, I invariably preach from the gospel. Why did I decide on that today?

Except that it's not what it seems if we were to read the text exactly as it seems today it would look pretty hard and fast and most of us are gonna feel a bit uncomfortable and just a bit too squirmy. But that's not the intention.

All writings are never written in a void. They're written, you know, in context of the day. Of the culture, of the people, of the times, of the situation in which they're in. And any scripture, particularly of the Gospels for example, is told, a number of times before it's actually written down. Not just through the through the oral traditions that were long and strong for decades before they were written.

But also, the original event that may have taken place as people remembered it - there was the telling of that event over and over again, and how people remembered it. I don't know about you, but sometimes when one person tells a story to another they'll highlight something that was important to them and the next time it's told to somebody else, they'll highlight what's important to them. I'm not talking about the whisper thing. I'm just talking about what we find in each story as it's told.

Then it was written down - within the context of a community in which Matthew was placed and he was talking to people who were Jewish converts to Christianity. Trying to hold on to all that was real and good for them - the law, the way, the Torah. And also what was happening for them now, as a new Christian community of faith - in a time of persecution - after the fall of the temple when everything looked pretty bleak. This is when it was written down.

So there's a number of layers of context and situation built into every story, together with the traditions of the day, some of them that were formal, some of them that were cultural. And there was a big mix of those as well. That's my introduction.

The first section talks about being angry. That being angry is the same as, you know, murdering somebody. Okay well hand up anybody who's never been angry? I don't expect to see a hand and certainly mine is not up.

There's nothing wrong with being angry, but there is if it leads to an act of violence and devastation and hurt and destruction of others, and of yourself, and in the world. The problem is not being angry. That's a normal, natural reaction to a situation that is maybe threatening or hurtful; but it's what we do with the feeling that makes the difference. What we do with not only anger, but all of our feelings that makes the difference. And that comes out in the others as well.

So Jesus is talking on the mountains still. We had the Beatitudes recently. We talked about salt and light last week and now here we're talking about feelings and how we actually live them out. So, if we get angry about something, let your motivation be building a better world, like that vision we were talking about earlier. That dream, rather than destroying the things that that's in front of me now because it offends me.

The world would be a changed place in a moment if that was our motivation. And that's what is being promoted here. Deal with it, with the person if you've got issues with each other. But I would want to say that extends to countries and nations and even in the business world. And I lived in that world for many many years right here in Sydney. So you know that's a big statement to make, that business and enterprise and even, gosh, leaders of countries - might want to think that way rather than saying: *I've got more, I don't know, nuclear arsenals than you do. Or: I've got a bigger budget than you have or if you don't come to my terms for trade we will cut off our relations with you.* I read that in the paper every day.

It's not actually building for a better world or in goodwill; it's about winning and being powerful. This speaks against that, at every point. It's our motivation behind our relationships that is important. And our motivation is always to build bridges, to build peace, all of those things that we talked about a few weeks ago.

The next section talks about adultery - and that really is very contextual of the day. A few little cultural norms (sorry to stereotype male and female here) but historically, that's how it was. Males had legal rights females didn't. They were owned as chattel under the law.

This was written in a time, too, when there was a move away from having more than one wife because men could have many wives and concubines and others too. That was part of the tradition - and there was moving into monogamy, so one wife. We'll talk about that a little in a minute. But adultery was something only a woman could commit under the law, because she belonged to somebody and she couldn't have any relation with somebody else. That's a break in that relationship.

So adultery was considered to be an offence on the husband, the owner of the woman - who might have had a relationship outside of there. But it was all right for men to lust and to have relationships with women, because that was considered okay.

We would see things very differently today. Now does this mean that being attracted to someone is a sin? Of course not. Even thinking of them romantically? Is that a sin? No.

But if it's breaking relationships then you've got to think of what is my motivation and what am I doing here? That's what's behind it for today. Jesus uses the rhetoric all through Mathew, uses the rhetoric of the day, which was a very kind of pro and against - a very Jewish way of arguing.

Rhetoric, you know: if you do that, then this; if you do that, then this; if you do that, then this. And so that's the way the argument would be made at the time. So if you do that, cut it off, get rid of it. Don't let it get in the way. Get rid of your arm; get rid of whatever is getting in the way.

It's not ever intended to be literal, not even then. It was making a point of saying: don't let it go that far. Take control of yourself and think of your feelings and the care of others.

That leads me on to the next one, which is divorce. Divorce was permissible, as it is now. Only a male could divorce a wife because the wife didn't have any legal rights. So she couldn't divorce her husband, but he could divorce her.

Now then, a man could have many wives which is the only way one could be in relationship. Women couldn't have many husbands, but males could have many wives. It was moving into monogamy - one husband, one wife. So divorce was getting more prevalent. In the past if you got tired of one of your wives, you just got another one and added to the number. Now that monogamy was coming in, you had to divorce the one you had before you could get the next one.

So the talking about divorce is actually very contextual for the day. Whoever divorces let them give her a certificate of divorce. *But I say that anyone who divorces his wife except on the grounds of unchastity (I'll talk about that in a minute, not in great detail), causes her to commit adultery and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

The original text talks about things like grounds of unchastity. There is already a break in the relationship, and it was seen to have been proven by the fact that there was now a new relationship in place.

I want to take a little step back from that - as a woman grew in those day, she was usually betrothed to a male, so didn't necessarily choose who they married. It wasn't necessarily for love. It was understood that love would grow - and that is certainly possible.

So she, as a female, was the property of her father until she married - and then she was the property of her husband. Now if she was divorced and there was no one else in her life, she was out on the streets; or she may go back to her father who may accept her back. It's not a good future.

So if there is a new relationship, there may be a new future for her. That's just another little aside on some of these how things worked. Women also weren't to own property or have businesses or have an income of their own, except through the male.

It's nice to know that times have changed and we're all trying to get on an equal footing these days, at least in the law. We have a long way to go in our relationships though, don't we. And today we're not talking about just male and female. We're talking about all relationships, all partnerships and all people in loving, respectful adult relationships. Show respect for one another. Don't just discard them because you're getting tired. Maybe work on it. Or, if there is an end to the relationship, do it with care.

The next part talks about your oath. I can remember hearing some people saying: *oh well, you know, if God lets me lets me do that, or by the will of God or whatever* -and that obviously is a term that was used in the day.

But Jesus is saying just: *let your less yes be yes and your no be your no*. Don't leave it on somebody else's shoulders to take the responsibility of your decisions. Be an adult. You are free enough to do that. Be an adult. And if you say you're going to do something, your yes is enough; and if you say you're not going to do something; your no should be enough. You shouldn't have to have some other undergirding permission to do that.

That would have been very freeing for some people, because in this same community they may have been, in the day, slaves. And certainly there were women - and could they make an oath on their own when they were not a legal entity? It's giving everybody the opportunity to be a human being.

Very hard texts to work through sometimes; and if we look at them literally - which is never a wise thing to do, always looking at them in context and always in context of what would this be saying for us today.

God had a dream. A dream for all people to live in freedom. And the first reading today was about that exactly. The giving of the way, or the giving of the law.

The way people could be, now that they were out of Egypt and freed from slavery. How to live as whole free human being. And the laws were there to help them find their way in that, and not fall into slavery again. Not be owned by other people or other peoples.

And the living out of the law, that's talked of in Matthew, is those same ways of living, being drawn into for today. How do we live in ways that are going to be life-giving, not only to us but to all people? It comes back to the vision and our motivations in our relationships - not only individually, but corporately and beyond.

The beauty of the gospel is that even when we get ourselves caught up in some of this, and we all do sometimes, then there is always a new beginning. There is always a resurrection story. There is always an opportunity for a new start.

We've already named that - and we call it forgiveness and reconciliation. And we have a new start - every moment of every day. We don't have to wait for Sunday, but sometimes it helps to have those opportunities publicly to do that.

So I offer you these readings as insights into the culture of the day, but ones that need to be interpreted for today and for the people of today. And the motivating factor behind all of them is our feelings and our attitudes.

If our feelings and attitudes are to constantly build and rebuild and heal and have good will, then the world, and we, will be a much more healthy people.

God bless you in your journey.