

Matthew 5:21-37 Pastor Bill Uetrict 6 Epiphany 2/12/17

There are some moments in the life of a community that are particularly poignant, especially sad, exceptionally confounding. For the Reeths-Puffer community, and by extension, this congregation, this week has contained many of those moments, as we have dealt with the unexpected death of a middle-school boy. We will be hosting here the funeral for him on Monday, by the way. The boy's death has meant quite a few conversations for me with many people dealing with and processing this death. The conversations have been multi-faceted. Some of them have dealt with practicalities, others with spiritual matters, others with the deep and confusing emotional responses that occur during times like these. One dimension of the conversation that has intrigued me greatly and, I suspect, encouraged me the most has been the reflection on the meaning of community, its importance and its relevance.

A particular conversation I was involved in had to do with our own community of faith. A woman who in many ways is an outsider to our community has noticed some things about us—things that for her were quite encouraging, things that from her experience were contrary to what she thought religious communities were normally about. She saw the significance of community and was heartened by what she experienced here in the welcome of the broken and the folks who often aren't included.

Obviously, her comments got me thinking about the significance of community—it cannot be overstated—and what it is that we want in community, what it is that we want from the community that we treasure.

Jesus in today's gospel reading from Matthew talks about how we *care* for community, how it is that we live out who we really are as, Dr. Martin Luther King put it, "the beloved community." We've been up on the mountain with Jesus the last couple of weeks. His words to us started with an amazing description of what life in the beloved

community looks like. It doesn't look like anything we know in the culture we are a part of. It's a community where the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, the peacemakers, and the persecuted are honored. That's who we are, we are told. And I trust that vision includes all of us. We all, especially the hurting, the broken, the searching, and even the unpopular, find a home in the beloved community.

Last week we were given more information about our who we are. We were told that we are "salt and light." That's who we are, not who we should be, could be, ought to be, but who we are! Now as Joel pointed out last week, that identity contains within it a compelling invitation to live out that identity, to practice in practical ways who we are, to be salt and light in the world. Our identity naturally leads to our mission. And I think Jesus in part today is describing our mission.

Now before we get into the specifics of that mission I must say that from a 30,000 foot view of that mission it is all about people. Before you get too literal with Jesus words, before you get too specific, before you start having arguments about who needs to be included or excluded because of Jesus' words, you must get this: the focus of our mission is primarily people. What Jesus is teaching us today has to do with the kind of community that we want to be as the Beloved Community, how it is that the Beloved Community operates as it lives out its identity in the world.

Jesus is especially remarkable in his teaching today about murder. He reminds us of the teaching of the past, a teaching he obviously values and then goes on to take us to a deeper place: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder, but / say to you—there's obviously a new sheriff in town—if you are angry with a brother or a sister you will be liable to judgment. That is, you will be brought into the kind of crisis that an encounter with God brings.

For Jesus, killing is not just about literal murder. It is about the character of our relationships with other people. Unresolved anger with a brother or sister, insulting a brother or a sister, calling them names is seen by Jesus as a violation of the command not to murder.

It's amazingly amusing how Jesus gets at this point. I hope you note in his teaching that as the so-called crime seems to get less serious the punishment gets more severe. You get burned in the garbage heap, Gehenna, translated in our version as the "hell of fire," for calling someone a fool. The most dramatic punishment is given for something that for us seems somewhat inconsequential. "All I did is called her an 'idiot.'" You got to get this. It's a whole new world in Jesus. All the old categories are scrambled.

What kind of community is the Beloved Community? How do we live out who we are? We treat people with dignity. We don't dismiss people. We may disagree with them, and we may even get angry with them. But for us, that disagreement, that anger is not where we leave the relationship. We won't call people names, dismiss the very essence of who they are. We may not like their politics. We may not like their religion. We may not appreciate the way they make their chili, but we do not discount them, contrary to what Facebook teaches us. In the Beloved Community, no one is discounted. In the Beloved Community, reconciliation is our goal, so much so that being united with the folks we are alienated from will be the first aspect of our religious duty. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, leave your gift there before the altar and go first, make the long trip back to your home and be reconciled to your brother or sister."

It's all about people, folks! And in case you don't believe that yet, hear this: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." And how about this: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

You need to understand that in Jesus' day polygyny (having more than one wife) was not generally practiced. The way that some men

were able to get to have more than one wife was through divorce, sometimes brought about by what Jesus labels “adultery,” lusting after someone else’s wife. Your eyes told you that you wanted her, and so you went after her and tried to get her.

And Jesus is saying that women aren’t objects. Women matter. They aren’t throw-away items. Divorce could place women in such precarious positions. To not have a husband or a male caretaker in Biblical days was for a woman to be placed in an incredibly challenging financial situation. Divorced and widowed women became some of the most vulnerable people in the culture. In the Beloved Community, the vulnerable are at the center of our life together. In the Beloved Community, women are not discounted. No one is discounted. No one is written off. People are not objects. They are children of God, worthy of the dignity that is already theirs. And the vulnerable are especially worthy of treatment that embraces their dignity. This is the way it is in the Beloved Community.

Now amazingly, some people hear the kind of teaching that Jesus is involved in today and find ways to move people into unnecessary guilt or to exclude them. Jesus’ words about lusting after someone else are not about shaming us for sexual desire, for finding someone to be attractive or sexually interesting. That’s normal human behavior. Honestly, it’s what got all of us here. If it wouldn’t be for sexual interest, none of us would be around.

And what’s more, Jesus’ teaching about divorce should not be interpreted in such a way whereby we create a new cast of lepers, a collection of unclean, impure, particularly scarred human beings, namely divorced people. Divorced people should never be scorned, treated with anything less than the dignity that is their God-given gift. Arguing about who among the divorced is worthy or not worthy, telling people that they should never divorce, keeping them away from the table of the Lord because they are divorced is to miss the point.

The point is this: in the Beloved Community we treasure relationships. In the Beloved Community people are not discounted,

which, by the way, will help us understand Jesus' last teaching today, a teaching that is somewhat bizarre to us. He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely,' but I say to you, Do not swear at all, by heaven or earth, or Jerusalem, or your head, [or whatever]." In those days when people were making promises they would bolster those promises with references to things that they would build their promises on: "I swear on a stack of Bibles," we might say today. Swearing is for people who don't trust each other. Oaths serve to underline doubt, not certainty in communication.

In the Beloved Community we value people, we so don't discount them that we talk with them directly. In the Beloved Community, reconciled people speak the truth to each other and live in trust with one another.

It is a privilege to be in community. It is a gift. We are the Beloved Community in which all have a place. To be who we are, to be salt and light is to value relationship, care for people, embrace the vulnerable, discounting no one.