

6 Epiphany A 2017
The Rev. Donna M. Wright
St. Matthew's Kellers Church
February 12, 2017

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

Moses gives us positive words today: choose life that you may live.

St. Paul gives us positive words today: God is the one who gives the growth – no matter how hard we work, all that is good or worthwhile comes from God's gifts, not our own.

But Jesus gives us nothing but hard sayings today, one after another.

Jesus starts out by mentioning the requirements of the law of Moses: "you have heard it said, 'You shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment'; but I say to you if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Jesus takes the requirement of the law and makes it harder. Murder is the same as anger, Jesus says.

And I want to protest and say, No, Jesus, it is not the same!

Then I think of the man in Arkansas, who was angry because the minivan in front of him was going too slowly and had, in fact, actually stopped at a stop sign. He was angry unto death. Angry unto murder, when some of the bullets he fired at the minivan ended up killing the driver's 3 year old grandson.

Anger can lead us to a very bad place, emotionally, physically, spiritually. Anger does indeed kill. It murders our compassion for the person we are angry with. It kills the softness that God desires to reign in our hearts. Anger hardens us, so we are likelier to break than to bend. Anger makes us want to not look at our neighbor in the best possible light, as Luther wrote in the Small Catechism that we should do. In this way anger is murder – anger murders what is best in this life we are given. Anger murders love.

Then Jesus gives us another hard saying for our time and place, when so many aspects of our culture are hypersexualized. Commercials. Computers. Billboards. Sex is used to sell all kinds of products. Worse than it was decades ago. 40 million people in the U.S. view pornography regularly. Those who are in that demographic will find Jesus' words particularly hard: "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at another with lust in the heart has already committed adultery in the heart." And not only that, but Jesus prescribes the penalty, the cure, for this lust-adultery: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." And the same for the right hand. Cut it off.

That.is.harsh. Cutting off a part of one's body is harsh punishment for adultery or lust. And I have noticed that for all the people who say they take Jesus' words literally, I haven't seen anyone who has plucked out their eye or cut off their hand. It seems many of us have had mercy on our body parts, instead of cutting them off. But is that not what lust is? Cutting off our neighbor? Lust means that I am a person but others are objects. Useful only for my pleasure. When we lust, we do not value the other person for

who they are or even what they contribute to the common good. When we lust we are the only persons whose pleasure or comfort or condition matters. We are cut off from everyone else. We cut ourselves off.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He says divorce is the same as adultery. In Jesus' time, only men could get a divorce. Women had no choice. No matter how a woman was treated by her husband, she could not get a divorce. But the husband could get a divorce without any reason at all. Just by writing a certificate of divorce. And the wife had to leave, with nowhere to go, and no resources. For she had left her family, to join his. In the 21st century, divorce is much different. But it still hurts. Divorce is another way we humans cut off those we are supposed to love. Divorce is a sign of brokenness. Every marriage, every relationship has elements of brokenness. Emotional cut off. Hardness of heart, toward someone who should be valued. Jesus says, that is wrong.

Jesus is believed to have been around 30 years old when he spoke these words, these hard sayings. Old enough to have seen anger and lust and false promises – and to have witnessed their terrible effects. Jesus offers these hard sayings to show his listeners how the hardness of their hearts hurts themselves and others. And when they feel how hard their hearts are – that their anger is as dangerous as murder, that their lust is like cutting their neighbor out of the human race, that their broken relationship hurts both people – then they – then we – can imagine a different way. A way where anger is laid aside. Then they – then we – can imagine a way where we do not make objects out of people. Then we can imagine a way where we become vulnerable. Vulnerable to disappointment – and to being surprised. That the people driving so slowly are being careful. That those we lust after are interesting. That those we want out of our life are beloved by the same God who loves us. When we allow Jesus' hard sayings to accuse us – then we are ready to hear the mercy in them. The grace. Then we can choose life – so we can live.

Amen