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**Weekend of Sunday, February 16, 2020**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 6/Proper X/Year A**  
**First Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20**  
**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9**  
**Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:21-37**  
**Sermon Title: “Blessed to be a Blessing”**

## **Theme**

*In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorts his followers to embrace standards of righteousness that exceed legal requirements and traditional expectations.*

## **Text**

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup>Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that (if) everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

<sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup>But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

## Sermon

Happy Valentine's Day weekend. True fact: Every time the Season of Epiphany in Year C of the Lectionary has six or more weekends in it, this series of readings come up and always on a weekend close to Valentine's Day. Isn't that lovely!?! Not!

The readings just ooze with love, don't they?

In the First Reading, Moses told the people, "God's way, or your own – but if you choose your own way, you're gonna die!"

In the Second Reading, the Apostle Paul scolded the Corinthians for their bad behavior, and calls them immature babies!

And in the Gospel Reading, Jesus reinterpreted the Law of Moses to the degree that none of us escape judgement, prison, and hell!

Happy Valentine's Day weekend to you all!

Alright, I joked around a little bit about these readings lacking in love, in actuality they are replete with love. Work with me and see if you don't agree.

The First Reading from Deuteronomy came from a speech that Moses gave to the Israelites as they were preparing to finally cross the River Jordan and possess the land that the LORD had promised to their ancestors; a land that they could have occupied 40 years earlier had they had some faith.

Modern Biblical scholars don't think that the ancient Israelites in the First Reading were a homogenous people and by that I mean, they were not all of the same race and religion before Moses set them free from their bondage to slavery. So the 40 years of wandering in the desert they had to endure for their faithlessness was not an altogether bad thing. It gave them 40 years to learn how to be one tribe, one faithful people gathered together by their common faith in God. Over those 40 years the LORD gave them numerous laws, ordinances, and commandments to help bring structure to their lives. Some of those laws, ordinances, and commandments were focused on cleanliness, health, and overall well-being. Some of them seem ridiculous to us today, but without modern medicine, health care, clean water, and

sanitation that we take for granted, they helped keep the people alive and formed them into one tribe.

At the time of that First Reading, their 40 years of wandering was over, and they were looking over the Jordan River valley and into the Promised Land when Moses said to them, and I paraphrase, "Today as you enter the land God promised you, you have a choice to make. You can continue in the way God has taught you and things will go well with you. Or you can go your own way. To continue on with God is to be blessed and to choose life. Going your own way will most certainly bring curses and death."

There is truth in Moses speech that transcends the ages. Some of you know I am a chaplain for the Youngstown Police Department, and at a chaplain's corps meeting on Friday we discussed the triple homicide that happened last Sunday morning. A comment was made that since the homicide happened at something like 3:45 AM at a nightclub, going to church was certainly not on the minds of those involved. If living a life of faith and worshiping God had been on the minds of those involved that night there would have been no homicide. But some are simply too "stiff-necked" to borrow an OT expression, to do the right thing.

Listen to the way Moses concluded this passage:

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days

The three men who were killed were in their 30's and the other one involved who survived is 44.

If you want to know why I agreed to be a YPD chaplain when recruited, my answer is two-fold. 1) We have several active and retired law enforcement officers in our membership and I asked them about it and they encouraged me to do it. And 2) I know that as the pastor of a predominately white middle-class congregation in a predominately white middle-class neighborhood, I do not put myself in the company of folks different than us so that I can encourage them to choose a life of faith. Maybe this is a way I can help.

Let's move on to the Second Reading from First Corinthians, or as President Trump might say, One Corinthians.

Corinth was a diverse multicultural community. As a people, they had fourteen castes, classes of people. These castes were developed to keep people among their own kind. That attitude, acceptable in Corinthian society was unacceptable in the Corinthian church, and so Paul often found himself correcting the bad behavior of the Corinthian Christians and teaching them to do better.

Human beings have not really advanced much since then have we? We all, including you and me, need to keep learning the same lessons that human beings have needed to learn from antiquity. So Paul wrote about feeding the Corinthians baby-food, because that is the level of their discipleship. As I said, human beings have not really advanced much since then have we? We need to keep learning and re-learning.

To say more about that, let's move on to the Gospel Reading.

Again like last week, the Gospel Reading is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which came early in Jesus' public ministry according to Matthew. Just before this passage, Matthew mentioned that Jesus had been throughout Galilee preaching and teaching and performing signs and miracles, and his reputation obviously preceded him, because now, in this passage, Matthew recorded that there were crowds of people there.

The Sermon on the Mount was one in which Jesus reinterpreted some of those laws, ordinances, and commandments that Moses gave the people in the First Reading and that they have had to guide their behavior ever since.

I said "reinterpreted" but that is putting it mildly. Jesus amped it up!

He said that avoiding murder is not enough. No, we should not allow ourselves to get that angry with another, or even insult them.

He said that avoiding adultery is not enough. No, we should not even look at another with lust in our heart.

And then he went and mentioned divorce. Did I wish you all a Happy Valentine's Day Weekend?

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Well, pastor what are we to say about all this? I am so glad you asked.

At the beginning of this sermon I told you these readings were replete with love and that if you work with me, I will show you. Well, what I see and hear the LORD saying to us in these texts is that from creation on we were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and just a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5). But because God loves us so much, and out of that great love God gives us the choice to love God back, many, in fact choose not to. They choose to go their own way. It's the same decision faced by the Israelites as they looked over the Jordan River valley at the Promised Land.

Just like the Corinthian Christians of the First Century, we need the discipline of devotional Bible reading, coming to worship to hear the Word of God, and to commune with fellow disciples. Why? Because we are constantly bombarded with the opposite message,

- that we can do it on our own,
- we only answer to ourselves,
- that our decisions – good or bad – don't affect anyone else.

That is stinking thinking. Last Sunday morning, three young men died and another will likely go to prison for a very long time.

- Trouble makers we say.
- Good riddance, we say.

But many families and family members are disrupted and confused and brokenhearted and angry, and now we wonder if their response will be forgiveness or retaliation. One emotion will bring blessings and life, the other will bring curses and death.

God revealed in Jesus Christ calls us, and all people for that matter, to a higher standard and although we are only at the beginning of his public ministry in Matthew 5, we know he demonstrated the higher standard he taught all the way to the cross and grave. So at the very least, we who call him Lord of our lives ought to humble ourselves, get over ourselves, and try to be Christ-like in our dealings with other people.

Today's readings speak of blessings and curses, life and death, good relationships and those that are broken. Moreover the texts suggest that we have a choice in these matters.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have been chosen by God and *blessed to be a blessing* for others. And as those blessed by God, we have a choice to make, and we have to make it every moment of our lives. We can choose to make it our goal to live according to the high standards of him we call Lord of our Lives, or we can choose our own way. The latter only leads to curses and death. But to choose to live as Christ lived means blessing and life.

### **Prayer**

God of blessing, you call us to be one with you and your creation in love, faithfulness, and truth. Help us to grow in our faith so that the choice to trust and obey you is always the choice we make and that our lives may be full of blessing and life. We pray this in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen