

Epiphany 6A
Matthew 5:21-37
16 February 2020
Christ Church

Years ago, a friend came to me in distress. We were both married with children and bumping up against the challenges of the mundane aspects of family life. My friend was experiencing distress because he came to realize that he had fallen in love with a colleague at work. He was perplexed that it was possible to have such strong feelings for someone other than his wife. He loved his wife. He loved his children, but the urge to follow this passion was strong.

In exasperation he said to me, “Why did God make the ten commandments anyway? Why does the spiritual life, the life of faith have to be so darn difficult? Why did God give me these feelings?”

When he presented these questions to me, I was as much of a rookie in theology as he was. I had yet to discern a call to the ordained life; but I had studied counseling and had observed enough human behavior in the school community to see why the Ten Commandments make sense. They are more than a set of arbitrary rules dictated from on high; they are a prescription for human health and well-being. The Creator knows the workings of our bodies, our minds, our spirits in a deeper way than we know them ourselves. As they paid attention to the nudging and stirrings of God, Israel discovered what was truly life-giving.

To me, the Ten Commandments are the equivalent of boundaries, a word we use in the counseling world. When we have good boundaries, we respect the other person, his relationships, her property, the space that we inhabit together. When we are lacking boundaries, we thoughtlessly impede the well-being of others. Sometimes we overstep with our demands; sometimes we are so self-absorbed that we ignore the needs of others or we pursue our wants at their expense. This is harmful to the

other; it is harmful to us; and it can compromise the integrity of the community.

In today's Gospel, Jesus instructs his followers to take those boundaries, those commandments of old even a step further. Not only do we refrain from committing murder, we work through our anger. If we harbor resentment, bitterness, ill will, Jesus instructs us to work it out before coming to the Table. If we have unresolved debts, we should find a path to settle them. If we are tempted to violate ours or another's marriage vows, we are not to act on these feelings. Divorce is a last resort when a marriage has become destructive.

We are to speak with each other directly, honestly, and without equivocation. We are to be clear with one another: Yes means yes; no means no. We are not to swear or use empty words in our communication with God.

The spiritual life – a life of integrity lived in a community of faith – as has its moments of great challenge. And, as all of us all on a path of healing, we will inevitably hurt one another with our words or actions. I imagine that the Ten Commandments, and Jesus' elaboration of those Laws, give us the practical pathway to our community's health and stability and solidarity.

This Code of Ethics, Jesus' Law of Love, is not an imposition; it is a means to health. And, we wonder, what about divorce? In the context of Jesus' day, divorce could leave a woman penniless, homeless, and with no means to care for herself or her children. The prohibition was a protection.

In our context, divorce, as we know, often becomes the only life-giving option when destructive behaviors, either physically or emotionally, disintegrate the integrity of a marital bond. When a couple is unwilling or unable to seek counsel, divorce becomes the only life-giving option. Nonetheless, Jesus' standard remains as a beacon. If you have an issue with your brother or sister, address it; work through it; do whatever it takes to get to the other side of

it. We do this for the integrity of our souls. We do this for the integrity of the community.

And, we don't have to do this alone. God is with us. God is for us. The person of Christ is an ever-present Divine Light who wants us to live in love, who wants us to live in Him. I don't think we get to do that until we have thoroughly learned the lessons of love. God patiently waits while we struggle to get the lesson – ever hoping that we will reach out for help and recognize that we can't do this alone.

My friend stayed true to his marriage. It wasn't easy. He created better boundaries at work; he made a clear choice to spend more time with his wife, keeping that relationship fresh. His faith became a rudder to steady himself through churning passions.

The laws of love are meant for our well-being, not our misery. We cannot have it all. Love requires choices, difficult choices, daring choices. And, God give us the grace of his Divine Love as an anchor, a shield, and a strength. And even when we fall short, when we go our own way, God is waiting for us; God is longing for us to turn toward Him, because God is our life, our light, and the ground of our being. To God be the glory!