CONGREGATIONAL UCC, EVANSVILLE

Christ's Impossible Teachings

Congregational United Church of Christ
Evansville, Wisconsin
February 12, 2023
Matthew 5: 21-37
Rev. William R. Wineke, preaching

You have heard it said that the law of Moses says ”Do not commit murder. If you commit murder you are subject to judgment.” But I say, if you are angry with someone you are subject to judgment. --Matthew 5: 21, 22

I think that if there is one phrase I have heard most often when people come to me for counseling, it begins with “I have tried so hard. . .”

Spoken or unspoken, I would guess this is a feeling each of us has had at one point or another, probably at many points, in our lives.

“I have tried so hard to be a good husband/wife but. . .”

“I have tried so hard to be a good parent, but. . .”

“I have tried so hard to earn a promotion at work, but. . .”

“I have tried so hard to lose weight, but. . .”

I have tried so hard, but nothing seems to work. I have tried so hard but, it's as if I weren't even there at all.

We don't just take good luck for granted. We try to be worthy. We try to earn good outcomes. We take seriously the maxim, “God helps those who help themselves.” We do. We really do. But so often it seems that God helps those who don't deserve it.

And, now, we read this morning's scripture lesson and it feels as if Jesus, himself, is rejecting us.
No matter what you do, he says, it isn't good enough.

Just look at the comparisons:
Anger is as bad as murder. Calling someone an “idiot” is cause to be brought before the judgment throne. Having sexual thoughts about someone is as bad as committing adultery.

Maybe even worse. “If your eye – even if it is your good eye – causes you to lust, gorge it out and throw it away.”

Yikes! What's wrong with that guy?

I guess the answer to that depends on how you look at his contentions.

When I was a kid growing up in Verona and attending St. James Lutheran Church I remember the pastors preaching on this text and they all had a similar position: It is impossible to win salvation by our own good works because in the eyes of God a lustful thought is as bad as adultery and anger is as bad as murder. Therefore, we are all sinners deserving of hell.

And that is pretty much what Jesus is quoted as saying.

But that interpretation also seems to be counter to everything else Jesus says as he befriends tax collectors and prostitutes and heals lepers, that sort of thing.

In fact, that interpretation seems to counter the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, from which it is taken. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, the “Blessings,” on those who strive for righteousness and do good things.

So, I wonder if we might not wish to look at a different interpretation of these admittedly harsh words in this morning's reading.

Could these teachings be a compassionate answer to the feelings of frustration I spoke of at the beginning of this sermon?

Because the common thread of those feelings is the bitter realization that “my best is not good enough.”

To which Jesus answers, with compassion, “No, your best is not good enough; let's try another way.”

My very best efforts may not achieve the goal I want, especially when the goal I want involves changing another person's personality or actions. That other person may have goals of his own, goals of her own, that don't involve my getting my own way.

And trying harder and harder and harder is not likely to change that fact.

Our prayers, then, are not to get God to change the other person but, rather, that God grant

us the humility to accept our failure, that God grant us the compassion to accept the idea that our best efforts were their own reward if they made us better people, rather than failures at changing others.

Because our peace of mind and our journey toward wholeness comes from trusting God in every circumstance, not in achieving “goals” that have more to do with our individual egos than they do with enhancing the life of the other person.

Maybe the key phrase in this whole passage is “You have heard it said. . .”
We have heard it said. We have heard that it is better to be rich than to be useful, that it is better to be young than to be old, that it is better to be a marathon runner than to be disabled with arthritis, even that it is better to keep the letter of the law than to keep the spirit of the law.

Keeping the spirit of the law, stifling our anger, compromising with an opponent, averting lustful thoughts, all lead to trust in God and all lead to productive lives, productive in God's terms, at least, if not always in human estimation.

The trick to reading the Bible, I think, is to search always for the spirit, for the meaning in today's world, and not be bound by the letter. There are always people who gouge out their eyes because of their fear of lustful thoughts. We tend to call these people mentally ill.

The healthy people are those who accept that we all have human limitations but that, with God's help, we can lead blessed lives.

That is the Good News. Thanks be to God!