

Benzonia Congregational UCC
February 13, 2011
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (A)
Matthew 5: 21 - 37
"Tough Love"
Dan Furman

God of all creation,

Though we struggle at times to see the order in the chaotic world we live in, still we know that it was your hands, your breath that brought light from darkness, life from death, purpose from apathy. Your words to us do not always bring us comfort, sometimes they challenge us to the core of our being. Listen to our hearts and may your Spirit bring balance to our wonderings of your Word. We pray that the words that are spoken and the communion of our gathered thoughts, bring peace and glory to you, O God, for we believe that you are steadfast and transforming. Amen.

Last week, I was in Traverse City at Staples picking up some supplies for the Bridal Expo that we participated in last Sunday. On one of the counters, was one of those large red buttons that had the word, "Easy" on it like in their TV commercials where someone in some office situation is experiencing a rather difficult task, and someone sees an "Easy" button, pushes it, and magically, the difficult task is solved. It would be **really nice** if for today's sermon, there was an "Easy" button on the pulpit that I could press that would solve all the difficult problems, but instead, we have to actually talk about the challenges of the day.

I want you to know, that the irony is not lost on me, by the way, about some of Jesus' teachings for today about anger and the disintegration of relationships juxtaposed with tomorrow being Valentine's Day. I could have selected a different text for my focus. Indeed, on the Internet, more than a few clergy were commenting on Facebook that they were planning **not** to

talk about some of the lessons Jesus was teaching today, but others were trying to encourage everyone to take on Jesus' challenge to us even now.

I should say that Facebook and the Internet provide more than a few "Easy" button moments in that, not all that long ago, pastors relied heavily, and still do, on Commentaries that are books of writings that have been compiled for hundreds if not thousands of years about what thoughts have been shared from various theologians, pastors, and rabbi's about various Scripture passages. I have a set of Commentaries that I proudly purchased at the start of my ministry just before I graduated from Seminary. They did then and they still come in **very** handy when I prepare for sermons. But Facebook, I believe, is the new commentary system, where clergy can not only share in real time, their own thoughts, but also post essays and viewpoints they have discovered along the way for others to contemplate. It really is amazing to have instant reflections, thoughts, and discussions in a community of people who may have never met before. And while I'm sure there are places on the Internet where sermons could be purchased, I cannot **ever** imagine pushing **that** "Easy" button as each sermon has to be tailored and shaped not only with current events in mind but also for individual congregations, not to mention room for the Spirit to weave in and out of the process. And so this morning, we forge forward into unpopular teachings.

Two Sunday's ago, we found Jesus beginning his sermon on the mount with the Beatitudes, blessings that instill good feelings in most of us even though upon further reflection we discover that many of the lessons are quite hard to hear. Last Sunday, Jesus continued with an inspirational message by encouraging us all to be salt and light in the world, to give flavor to the bland, to shine light into the darkness. But today's lesson is not so pleasant to our ears.

A quick overview of the four points Jesus makes today are: lessons about anger, lessons about adultery, lessons about divorce, and lessons about swearing falsely. Jesus begins each section by saying, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." as a way of quoting the Hebrew Scriptures or what we have come to know as the Old Testament, and then repurposing, or reframing what the laws said and giving them new life in his teachings. What Jesus did here was revolutionary. He was quick to say that the OT should not be abolished, just basically updated. It was not blasphemy, but everyone knew how close his comments were. So while he had their attention, he told them that anger is as dangerous as murder, that looking at someone other than your wife is as bad as acting on a thought, that divorce may not provide a happy ending, and that everyone needs to choose their words carefully in transactions. Of course, Jesus used much stronger language than this that not only caught the attention of those who heard him, but caught the imaginations of anyone who had power over **anyone** else for the next 2000 years and continuing today to establish control over whichever minority group is desired.

Now, you may have noticed that I'm not just diving into each of the four points and endorsing them all. Am I pushing the "Easy" button? No. But today, we address head on, some areas of discomfort. What do we, modern-day disciples do, when we do not follow the absolute commands we find in the Bible? How many laws or pronouncements are we breaking today? First Corinthians Chapter 14 says, "Women should be silent in the church, for they are not permitted to speak." Well, our lay reader, Kay, is not the first, nor will she be the last to speak in our church, let alone the fact that our denomination and others ordain women to lead churches, thanks be to God! (By the way, in a month we will continue our annual tradition of women's Sunday, when the women of our church will lead us in praise and prayer.)

So what do we do with this Biblical teaching? Or the one for today that is probably the most controversial, the prohibition of divorce?

Society has evolved and continues to evolve around the subject of marriage. For years, it was illegal for a person of one race to marry a person of another race. Not very long ago, a justice of the peace in Louisiana refused to marry an interracial couple even though it is no longer illegal. For many years, interdenominational marriages were frowned upon, in fact the overwhelming majority of couples I have married have been turned away from churches because one was Protestant and the other Catholic, or one was Christian and the other Muslim, or one believed something and the other not very much. Currently it is against the law in our state for two people of the same gender who love each other to get married, though with the dissolution of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and the rising popularity of civil unions, we will see if this marriage restriction will disappear as the others have, over time.

Likewise, the majority of the couples I marry already live together, some have children, some have children from previous relationships, some are getting married for a second or third time. When I ask them what they think will be different, most think **not much** will change. To which I ask them the scary question to me which is, "Then why get married?" So far, the couples reflect on this, sometimes for the first time, and discover new appreciations, but I wonder if marriage itself will disappear as time goes by.

Likewise again, the topic of divorce has undergone major change in our society. It used to be taboo for married couples to separate. Now, as we know, half of all marriages end in divorce. And I feel the need to mention that this is not the first time I have preached on the subject of divorce, here. It came up last year in the Lectionary, though then it was in the Gospel of Mark and I'd like to repeat what I said then in that, "I just have to wonder, did Jesus know

after he said this the impact it would have for so many millions of people? Did he know **how** his words would hurt so many people who have felt deep shame in even contemplating leaving an abusive situation, or how his words might cause a person to stay in an unhealthy relationship with someone who was unfaithful or abusive or in a relationship where a couple simply fell out of love with each other?" I refuse to believe that Jesus, who defended the woman who was about to be put to death for the very crime of adultery, would then force even one woman, let alone all women, to remain in abusive relationships.

So how do we reconcile these teachings? Especially when we have sisters and brothers in faith, local congregations and even whole denominations that would take these teachings as sound and sacred and try to enforce them. Even though it is impossible for anyone to follow every single law in the Bible: the food laws, the purity laws, animal sacrifice, not working on the Sabbath, not killing, not using the Lord's name in vain, not wearing two kinds of cloth at the same time, punishing disobedient children with death, not mixing two kinds of seeds in the ground creating hybrids, not eating pork or bacon, the only purpose in life is having children, love your enemy, if you are struck then turn the other cheek, and on and on. It is impossible for anyone to follow every single law. How do we reconcile these teachings? This is the wisdom behind our denomination's usage of the God is Still Speaking campaign, that rather than seemingly enjoy pointing out the sins of others in society, which sometimes borders on being Pharisaic, we feel that the inspired Word of God is still being revealed to us, that the Bible has more to say than just the words on the pages.

Moving away from divorce for a moment, the first topic Jesus discusses in our lesson for today, is anger and that anger between one another is just as bad as murder! That reconciliation must be sought before approaching the altar, before approaching God for praise or prayer.

This is a fascinating teaching that I'm sure many are unable to follow. We are all so busy in our lives with so many things going on, it's hard enough to push the agendas out of our head and listen to a sermon let alone listen for what God is speaking to us on Sunday mornings or at any point in our week. With so much going on, it is very easy for us to lose patience, for frustrations to build, for anger to awake and thrive. Just think how many people would we lose at the door if we restricted people who were dealing with anger, access to worship? We can hear that Jesus is strongly wanting us to settle our differences first, but is this a lesson we want to follow, to the letter? And furthermore, is anger always a bad thing?

Think about the events of the last two weeks. What an extraordinary moment in the history of civilization to have an almost completely peaceful revolution overthrow a dictatorship in Egypt! Yes, there was some unrest and unfortunate deaths, but in my generation, the only other massive attempt I have witnessed via television was in Tiananmen Square in China where an equally large amount of people tried to peacefully overthrow the government, only to end in bloodshed and with no regime change. This week, the world seemed to be waiting for awful pictures of armies sweeping in to disrupt the hundreds of thousands of protestors, but it never happened. Though many of the people belong to a different religion, the concept is the same. We witnessed thousands of Egyptians in prayer and then protesting. Is anger sometimes warranted? It seems to me that a God who loves us unconditionally will accept us even if we approach with anger in our hearts. More so that there is a place for anger, not in abusive relationships, not in putting others down, but in sorting out grief and in releasing our frustrations.

So what do we do with today's lesson if we disagree with it? What is God speaking to us today? I hear two things. First, it is just too easy for churches to legislate what we all ought to

be doing or not doing. Some people are looking for strong boundaries, where they know that they are "in" and that others are "out", but after a while, like teenagers, we no longer like being told what to do. We want guidance with our freedom; we want God's embrace in our wandering; we are looking for Emmanuel, knowing that in our daily lives, God is with us.

The second lesson that I hear, is that God wants us to live in the mystery. Many of our youth went to a school dance last night. Did they know what was going to happen, which songs would be played, who would be there? No. But they lived in the mystery. Yesterday, many of our members and friends in the community went to Winterfest in Beulah. Nothing says mysterious to me more than Outhouse Racing! And though I didn't see it myself, I know it was snowing while the fireworks were set off. I've witnessed that once before on New Year's Eve. It's almost magical. The Good News about Jesus is not about rules, not about regulation, and certainly not about punishment. The Good News about Jesus is that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcome to gather around a table with two or three people or two or three thousand people, and that when we do, Christ is with us. The Good News is that God hears our prayers and is still speaking, that God loves us no matter what, whether we are processing our anger, whether our relationships last or end, whether we speak appropriately or not, and that our God forgives us and looks forward to whatever it is that we are about to encounter. Thanks be to God! Amen.