

Closing the Loopholes

Deuteronomy 30: 19-20

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live...

Matthew 5: 21-37

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 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. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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 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.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.

“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.’³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Imagine. Moses standing before his people. Forty years of leading the community. The adventures they shared. Crossing the Red Sea. God’s voice speaking up on the mountaintop. Eating manna, manna, manna again. Now they stand on the precipice of entering the land as a new people. In Moses’ sermon finale he looks back on the memories and says there are two paths they can take moving forward. One leads to destruction and division. The other leads to life and community as God intends. At the end, Moses’ final words to his people are to, “Choose life.”

As we start, we admit we have a choice. Living in concert with God and each other is a choice we get to make. Yes, things happen that are outside of our control, but we get

decide how we deal with them. Anne Lamott talks about the first time she showed up to church after terminating a pregnancy. She sat in the back row hungover. Before the sermon began, she left. The next week she tried again—hungover from looking for love in all the wrong places—but this time she stayed until the final hymn. She says the song touched a raw spot inside of her. She describes it as if the community was singing to her alone, holding her like a parent does a child in a rocking chair. Scared, Anne fled. Only on her way home an imaginary kitten followed her to her front door. She debated whether to let the imaginary cat inside, because once you let in a stray they rarely leave. After weighing the options, and after a few expletives, she said, “I quit. All right, you can come in.” Letting God in is a choice. Letting each other into our lives is a choice. Following a path to life—a choice.

Of course, we human beings need rails to help guide our decisions along the way. We need a barometer or boundaries that help us to remain in healthy relationship together. So God offers God’s community laws to help. We know them: Thou shall not murder, commit adultery, bear false witness. Our woman’s circle that meets once a month is studying them. The series is called “Love Carved into Stone.” The point: to be a loving relationship with God and each other by honoring them. Because how we treat each other matters to God.

But over the years, the laws get interpreted and reinterpreted; and by the time the laws reach Jesus’ day, there are a lot of loopholes. Sort of like how if you’re rich enough you can hire lawyers who find loopholes in tax laws. Or how major corporations like Duke energy can legally dump coal ash into the Dan River. Or even how the 13th Amendment freed slaves, except there was an asterisk with a clause: “unless you have been convicted of a crime.” Suddenly Black people were arrested in droves. Then back to work they went into the fields until they could pay off their “bond.” It’s a loophole created for injustice.

The same things are happening in Jesus’ time. So Jesus gets to the heart of the matter and closes the loopholes. “You have heard it said, you shall not murder. But I say to you...” come on, that’s a pretty low bar. If you shame, or smear, or hold onto resentment, or bully another, have you not severed the relationship as well? And then in a patriarchal society he calls out the men: what good is it to promise not to have an affair when there are fantasies happening in your heads. The truth is, we cannot live in healthy relationship together if we are turning people into objects to be ogled and Googled—it also severs the connection. Then there is the biggie for our time: telling the truth. Let your yes be yes, and your no be no. Stop finding loopholes in the truth. No more alternative facts. No more spinning the story. Lies divide the community in epidemic proportions. In each instance, Jesus is closing the loopholes.

Which brings us to the teaching that has caused the most damage over the years: what Jesus says about divorce. My grandmother was a devout catholic. She attended church every single day. After she died, here was a joke that her rear end print was still on the pew cushion. My grandfather was a World War II and Korea vet who suffered from severe PTSD and turned to alcohol to cope. The marriage dried up and my grandmother could no longer tolerate his choices and behaviors. Eventually, she divorced him. Except, for her to remain in good standing with the church, she had to have the 25-year marriage annulled—claiming the marriage never was a marriage in the first place. She did it so she wouldn't have to carry around the "D" label, and so she would be able to receive communion once again. Too many people have been harmed by these teachings.

But we need to remember that in Jesus' time handing a woman a divorce certificate was like handing her a death sentence. She would have nowhere to go and no community to care for her. The more conservative rabbis taught that a man could divorce a woman if she burnt his toast. In other words, a man doesn't need a reason. The other side said only in the case of infidelity. Jesus chooses the latter because he says the law is about protecting the community from sexist and misogynistic loopholes; especially protecting those who are bullied, objectified, lied to, and discarded.

Still, I know there are many churches today who have used Jesus' teaching as a way to inflict shame rather than protecting those who were vulnerable and hurting. So if you or someone you know has ever experienced this pain of rejection, or was made to feel like you did not belong; or was told you could not receive God's gifts of grace at the table, as a minister of the gospel and a representative of the church of Jesus Christ, allow me to apologize. I am so, so sorry.

When it comes to the love of God and Jesus' vision of beloved community, there are no loopholes. There is only choice. One leads to division, the other to life. May we continue to choose life, asking for forgiveness when we do not. Amen.