

6 Epiphany A 20

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Rev. Trish Schmermund

Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

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Grace and peace to you from Jesus, the light of the world. Amen.

Did you know... that the hot commodity in the late 1700's - early 1800's was cotton? Like social media invading every home on the planet in our time, cotton, in its day, was white gold, paving the laneways of the plantations, further ingraining the reality of elitism, tempting religious and every day folk alike with prosperity promises. But then, in 1808 the slave trade became illegal. Great news! Except, there was a problem: lots of work still needed to be done, and there was still a lot of money that needed to be made. But, there was no more stealing people from their homeland half a world away.

Unfortunately, this new law didn't change much. What once was terrible and public simply went underground. People found new ways to continue oppression, new ways to get the cotton picked, new ways to ensure they would have a steady supply of cheap labor. How did they do that?

Author Marie Jenkins Schwartz¹ explains:

1808, when Congress ended the nation's participation in the international slave trade, planters could no longer import additional slaves from Africa or the West Indies; the only practical way of increasing the number of slave laborers was through new births. With so much at stake, black women's reproductive role became politically, as well as economically, decisive.

In short, America entered into its own production of slaves, with women's value being determined not by the labor of her hands, but of her womb. The more children she could produce the more valuable she was herself.

I can imagine Jesus saying, *you have heard it said slavery is illegal, but I say to you unfair labor practices are just slavery under a different name.*

Of course we understand ideals like *love your neighbor, treat each other equally, be kind* are incongruent with slavery. We know that even in a superficial way this is a violation of the gospel. On a deeper level (and

¹ <https://medium.com/the-aambc-journal/the-truth-about-american-slave-breeding-farms-ee631e863e2c>

with the benefit of hindsight) we know that ending the slave trade was a tiny, first step toward equality, which is still not fully realized. On a deeper level, ending inequality is infinitely more difficult than writing a law. On a deeper level, we are learning about the ways oppression continues as we learn about ourselves.

Going deeper is what Jesus was up to as he says, *you have heard it said... but say to you...*

Meeting the minimal command to not kill, not commit adultery, not take God's name in vain, not covet is actually pretty easily achieved. Not unlike putting a law on paper.

Jesus invites us to not cling superficially to words of promise, hope or correction, but to be vulnerable and open to the transformative work that has to occur inside of us. We have to understand that what Jesus sets in motion for us also beckons us to take responsibility and to participate in the unfolding salvation of the world.

When Jesus went to the cross the world was forever changed, because for the first time God invited us to be a living, breathing, active participant of death and resurrection. Think about that for a moment. No longer were we mere benefactors of a distant and invisible God, but we became intimately intertwined with the purposes of love and forgiveness in the person of Christ. We shouted at the trial "Crucify him!" We denied knowing Jesus. We shook with fear when the skies darkened. We hammered the nails.

But, we also carried the spices to the tomb. We rolled away the stone. We saw the cavernous and yes, empty, tomb. We have told the story for 2000 years. And all along the way, we have sought to understand the challenge and joy of a life devoted to love something like what we witnessed in Christ. Perhaps what Jesus might say today is, *you've heard it said, you read it in the scriptures, you've celebrated the Easter story, but I say to you, I'm still with you.*

And so, our transformation continues. We take up our own cross, and give up our own lives for the sake of others. This is why, in the Sacrament of baptism, we say that we die to this world in the water, 3 times we say, *I renounce the ways of evil*, that's why we invite the newly baptized to join us in mission, thanks and praise. Because of Christ we are invited ourselves to give generously of who we are, our time, our possessions. That's why forgiveness is a critical key in a beloved community. That's why love is the greatest commandment.

As God's beloved people we take up the challenge of going deeper, of seeking out the depth of God's calling. It's difficult work, because it asks us to change our self-serving ways, our addiction to money and possessions, and the societal norms that put one over another.

And so, you have heard it said...but I say to you...

- That you should come to church on Sunday/
be the church every day in the world.
- Reduce, reuse, recycle/
remember you are actually part of Creation.
- That you should tithe of your income/
remember all belongs to God.
- That you should forgive 7 times/
earnestly seek reconciliation with the oppressed.
- The church is in decline/
Christ is alive!

Amen.