

Introduction

There was a Toronto Star article a few months ago about Roy Moore, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama. For years he had fought a battle to keep a monument of the 10 commandments in his courtroom. It actually began with a wooden plaque of the 10 Commandments which he hung behind the judges bench “to fill the space”, but he soon commissioned a block of granite be carved with the two tablets of the 10 Commandments figuring prominently in it. The monument weighed 5280 lbs!

At some point the monument was deemed unconstitutional and so Moore was forced to remove it from the courtroom. He did so with a 57 foot crane which buckled under the weight of this massive piece of granite. It is a provocative image, the 10 Commandments of the law weighing down a 57 foot crane as it was hauled onto a flatbed truck.

Moore actually carried this block of granite along with him afterward to all his personal appearances.

As I read this story I wondered if that is how we feel about God’s law. Do the 10 Commandments weigh us down like this massive block of granite made a 57 foot crane buckle under its weight?

Our text today does not help this image at all. Not only does it say “thou shalt not murder”, it says that even being angry with your brother or sister makes you liable for judgement. Is this how we are supposed to live life – in fear of judgement, or with mounds of guilt on our shoulders? How should we interpret Jesus’ words here? This is another difficult text for us to wrestle with.

Body of the Text

Ten Commandments

But before looking at the law from the perspective of Jesus in Matthew, let’s go back first to the Old Testament and the story of the law from the Israelite’s perspective. When the Israelites were finally set free from their captivity at the hands of the Egyptians they had lived over 400 years as slaves. They did not know how to live in freedom, how to live together in relationship, and how to worship God. So God sent them his instructions on how to worship. He said:

I am the Lord your God;
I have taken you out of the land of slavery;
I have set you free;
Don’t have any other God’s – no idols;
Don’t give yourself to anyone but me;
Don’t lie, don’t kill, and don’t envy what someone else has.

Do you think they felt this was like getting weights put on their backs? I do not think so. They had no idea how to worship the God who had set them free and so he gave them 10 words, 10 single words. Most scholars agree the 10 commandments probably sounded something like,

“no-kill, no-steal” corresponding to their 10 fingers so they could easily remember them. These 10 words put boundaries between God and other so-called gods, between worshippers of God and idol worshippers. Imagine how good this must have felt for the Israelites, and how liberating – only 10 things to remember; and this, compared with the complete squashing of their will while under the rule of the Egyptians.

The law and the gospel

Now move forward to our text today. Through Matthew, Jesus fulfills, and integrates the message of the law in the Old Testament, these 10 Commandments, with the message of the gospel, and of God’s grace (the developing New Testament message).

To begin though, remember that this is still part of the *Sermon on the Mount*. The sermon begins with Jesus sitting. In Jewish custom, this is the posture of a teacher and not a judge, who would be standing. This is a teaching and not a judgment, an important distinction.

It is not just that we should not murder someone, begins Jesus, calling to mind the 10 Commandments language, *we shouldn’t even be angry with them. Remaining steadfast in our relationships*, Jesus continues, *is just the beginning of what it means to relinquish our need to objectify others.*

If the purpose of the text is not law but gospel, then how does it push us to the gospel message?

The first thing to recognize here is the emphasis Jesus puts on us treating each other with respect and dignity. Our relationships matter to God, deeply. These are not just quaint ideas about how nice it would be if we were kind to others, but it is the actual pathway to healing and wholeness.

I do not know how else to read this text but in a way that concludes that our relationships really matter to God.

Are there people in our lives who we could treat with greater dignity; with deeper empathy? Who would these people be.

Relationships

God works through *us* the message of kingdom values and thereby shares himself from within our lives. Treating people with dignity and respect is a necessary entry point into the realization of this. This text teaches us that we are all connected as humans, made in the image of God. “We are already one.” (says the monk Thomas Merton).

Anne and I like to take walks in the forest near her house. There is a long trail we often hike which winds up and down valleys and alongside rivers and streams.

One day while on such a walk we noticed something peculiar. From the ground we could see two trees growing side-by-side, perhaps six feet apart. But looking up, about fifteen feet above our heads there was a branch which grew across from the one tree and actually connected to the other – they actually grew together, even though they were two separate trees!

I have never seen such a thing grow naturally before; and we continue to be puzzled as to how this could occur. I have brought a few pictures along for you to see. It is a tree we now visit each time we walk in the woods.

But it also occurs to me that these connected trees are an apt representation of our human kinship. We are in a sense linked in ways which we barely imagine. The activity in my life affects your activity in yours. It is that complex and that simple; we are joined like those two trees growing together in the woods.

However, Jesus' teaching does not end there... even in light of Jesus' emphasis on our relatedness, we are not being asked to beat ourselves up when we inevitably will fail in our relationships with each other. Jesus narrows and levels the playing field in this teaching – we are reminded not to stand in judgement of others, as none of us are so different and, considering the words Jesus speaks here, all fall short of the law. We are together in this too.

Did you notice in last Sunday's gospel text when Jesus said that those who break the law will be least in the kingdom and those who keep the law will be great, in the kingdom? *Both remain a part of the kingdom.*

The law is clearly important to Jesus, but God's kingdom is not defined by those who do or do not keep the law perfectly. Rules and regulations are not an end in themselves, they just get us seriously engaged in our absolute reliance on grace and mercy.

The overstatements of the text

It is not about being perfect – and it is certainly not about guilt or shame when things do not go the way we had hope for, or when we make mistakes. I think we need to hear this – it is not about doing it right all the time. We will fail at this, regularly. This is where the profound truth of *Confession and Forgiveness* come into play each Sunday morning. We acknowledge that we fail, we confess, and we are forgiven.

And despite the undercurrents of judgement that surround this text, our invitation is always to remember God's promises to us of mercy and love; of God's unconditional promise of grace.

God's judgement, however that may look, will always be in light of his mercy...which is infinite (adapted from Pope Francis). God's mercy is infinite.

And all the overstatements in our text today - of cutting off body parts, and of burning in hell – serve, not as a threat of judgement or as a way of heaping guilt like Roy Moore's granite blocks onto our shoulders, as much as they are the way that Jesus draws our attention to how definitively important our relationships are to God; inviting us into activities which teach us how to receive God's love, to allow it, believe it, celebrate it, and trust it *in each other*.

The message of grace

This is the take-away message of this text; it is about the substance of grace – the resurrected Christ healing our lives through our lives.

We are wounded and broken people, imperfect; yet we are simultaneously sacred, divinely loved, made in the image of God, and showered by the integrity of God's everlasting promises – made visible through our relationships with each other and the world.

We may rest in these promises and find comfort in the hope they contain; trusting in who God is and what he has done for us; trusting our lives to the mercy of God. This is the beginning and the ongoing journey of the Christian life, a life of faith.

Conclusion

I wrote a poem which perhaps touches on this: how important we are to each other, and how we discover God in our journey through life together. I added it to a newsletter article last year but I think it is worth repeating here.

The inspiration was from another painting by the native artist Michael Robinson which depicted a canoe with two occupants facing each other while traveling down a river - the one was paddling while the other was collecting fish.

I saw the painting as representing our lives together, and the unknown that is tomorrow. It is a real journey we are on, with ups and downs - we support each other as we are able, but we also have disagreements, and sometimes we need to forgive each other. In other words, it is community. All the while though, we continue to move forward, down the river together, facing each other – discovering God together. Our journeys are connected to the end. I will close with this poem; it is titled *We Face Each Other*:

There is a future we are moving toward
It is unknown
We wonder about it
We even fear it
Hoping to understand it before it arrives

Tomorrow is hidden
But there is nothing to fear
Tomorrow is also a gift
That we share

We face each other
As a source of light
Day by Day

We face each other
We discover God
Through the events of each day
Through each other

We face each other
We discover God
We face each other Amen