



**DID HE REALLY JUST SAY THAT?**  
**SCRIPTURE: DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20; MATTHEW 5: 21-37**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

**February 9, 2017**

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The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastors

**PART ONE: DISORIENTATION/CHAOS**  
**HOW DO WE KNOW WHERE WE ARE GOING?**

**Pulpit**

**(MMS and SGB move to center of Chancel and take off stoles)**

**Reading One--SGB:** A reading from the Gospel of Matthew. <sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,<sup>[e]</sup> you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult<sup>[f]</sup> a brother or sister,<sup>[g]</sup> you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell<sup>[h]</sup> of fire. <sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister<sup>[i]</sup> has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,<sup>[j]</sup> and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court<sup>[k]</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**Interruption One--MMS:** Wait a minute? Did Jesus really just say that? What about abusive relationships? What about survivors of sexual assault and violence? Reconciliation is not always the road to freedom—it can be just another way to put already vulnerable bodies in more danger. Jesus must have a more liberating word here.

**Reading Two—MMS:** <sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>[l]</sup> <sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>[m]</sup>

**Interruption Two--SAM:** Wait! Stop. The healing Jesus, the Jesus of non-violence and love can’t be telling us to harm ourselves, to even dismember ourselves. The Jesus that calls us to fight for justice, to pray for mercy, to be a source of love in the world can’t be saying something that feels so harsh. There must be some good news here.

**Reading Three--SGB:** <sup>31</sup> *“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’* <sup>32</sup> *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.*

**Interruption Three—MMS:** Please, wait. I grieve for the ways this passage has been used as a weapon against people, women and men. I grieve for all the loss that folds out of the guilt and shame that this passage can load onto people. Did Jesus really just say that?

**Reading Four--SAM:** <sup>33</sup> *“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.’* <sup>34</sup> *But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>*

**Reading Five—MMS:** *or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.<sup>[n]</sup>*

### **Bridge to Part 2:**

- SGB (to Marcia): *This* is the word of the Lord??
- MMS: And we’re called to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18)
- SGB: How do we find our way?
- MMS: Where do we go from here?

### **Choir and SGB, MMS sing first verse of “LORD I WANT TO A CHRISTIAN IN MY HEART”**

### **PART 2: COMING TOGETHER TO SEEK DIRECTION, WISDOM, HELP IN THE DISORIENTATION At Font**

- MMS:  
Tell me what you do<sup>1</sup>  
when you get lost  
Tell me  
  
Tell me what you feel  
How things look to you

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<sup>1</sup> Poem, *When You Get Lost*, by Carol Prejean Zippert

What happens in your head  
What you say to yourself  
Tell me

Can you see anything  
when you get lost  
Can you hear what's about you  
Do you perceive life at all  
Tell me

Tell me what scares you most  
When you get lost  
Can you draw from deep inside  
What you use to hold you up

- SGB:

Do you move yourself differently  
Tell me

Tell me what you do  
to reach that special calm  
Can you direct a prayer  
When do you know to wait  
When do you know to risk  
Tell me

Tell me what you do  
When you get lost  
Tell me

Then tell me  
How you know  
When you are lost  
No more  
Tell me

- MMS: The Jesus who has walked with me through the shadows, who understands, who heals must be trying to tell us something.
- SGB: Sometimes we need to stop and listen a little longer.
- MMS: Faith is not a clear road or an easy road. Sometimes the road marks get taken away from us or distorted beyond recognition.

- SGB: Faith means believing when we can't see the path clearly. Faith means being willing to take the next step.
- MMS: The Jesus I know is a liberator and not afraid of speaking hard truth to power. We can't forget who he is talking to in this passage and what was at stake for the Gospel writer. Whoever wrote Matthew prioritized Jesus' relationship to rabbinic law--Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And part of how Jesus honored the law was to radicalize it--distill it down to its roots and call people to look at its core intention. He is taking the law to an absurd extreme here to show that all the loopholes and exceptions are not serving the core intention of the law, on the contrary these loopholes, these technicalities are diminishing the humanity of those affected by the laws the most. That is a sure sign of the abusive use of power: the ones least affected by laws are the ones who make and enforce them. And the ones with the least say in how laws get made are the ones most affected by them. Jesus words are a reckoning for those who use the law to abuse their power.
- SGB: Indeed, Jesus was speaking God's truth into time when the lines of division were clearly defined between: rich - poor, man - woman, Roman - Jew, judge - prisoner. Power was never shared across these lines and those who were born without it could not take their safety and their lives for granted. Take women for example, their lives were especially fragile. They were seen as little more than chattel to be bought and sold - property of their husbands. If they were without one, they were guaranteed a life of desperation and destitution. They couldn't own land, travel alone, or make decisions for their own bodies. And when it came to divorce, women were at the total mercy of their husbands - unable to demand it or prevent it.
- MMS: In the case of adultery in rabbinic law, it was all about the rights of men. Adultery muddied the waters in a patrilineal society--if you didn't know who was the real father of a child, then you didn't know who inherited property. Rabbinic adultery laws protected the patrilineal transfer of wealth. And women bore the brunt. Jesus turns our attention to what the true concern of the laws should be--how we see other human beings, how we treat other human beings. He goes to the heart of the matter--not the property concerns, but the sacred responsibility we all have to honor the intrinsic worth all people--no one should be a sex object or a chess piece in the game of concentrating wealth. People are not commodities. Jesus says, you are violating the most important law of all--the law of love, when you view someone as a means to an end. When you lust after someone, you diminish his/her humanity. You do not see the fullness of who they are. This objectification, this commodification of people, is such a violation of our humanity, that we might as well cut a piece of ourselves off--we might as well maim ourselves to show the distortion of our ways of being together in the world.

- SGB: Yes, and when we look at Jesus’s sentiments regarding divorce, it can seem that he is condemning all marriages that end or even advocating for people to stay together no matter the cost. This is a troubling thought, and it doesn’t seem true to the Jesus who shows us the nature of love and understanding. But when we take a closer look at this text we see a Savior who has a much more radical and liberating agenda. When we dig in deep, we recognize that Jesus is actually offering holy protection for women by preaching that those in power should not trivialize their marriages and dismiss their wives as they please. Instead, all of us, men and women, as people of God are called to walk a path where we do all that we can to nurture each relationship, journey with integrity side-by-side, take our holy commitments and promises to heart. There are many good reasons why relationship split apart, yes, but Jesus asks us to be intentionally compassionate and disarming no matter what. This is true for all of our relationships, our friendships, our church community. Christ invites us on a path where we walk alongside one another - and seek out authentic relationship - with God and with each other. This takes work, and sacrifice, great care, deep faith. Surely, it requires the sort of trust, grace, forgiveness and mercy that Christ demonstrates for us.

MMS: There aren’t easy answers. And it’s hard today not to feel the ground shifting under our feet. It can be hard to know if you are moving in the right direction, where the true north is that should be guiding us. In the midst of shifting ground, Jesus is a redeemer we can trust. And Jesus did say, people are not commodities.

SGB: The questions aren’t easy either. And the things that have oriented us, the things that have made life make sense may be disappearing before our eyes. But Jesus did say that bodies matter, real, flesh and blood bodies. Jesus, God incarnate, God in the flesh, God with us.

MMS: Just when we think we have nothing to hold onto.

SGB: That’s when Jesus reaches out his hand, and says follow me.

**Choir and SGB, MMS hum verse of  
“LORD I WANT TO A CHRISTIAN IN MY HEART”**

**PART 3: FINDING DIRECTION, FEELING CALLED,  
INVITING OTHERS TO GO WITH US IN THE DIRECTION  
GOD IS CALLING US TO GO  
At Table**

SGB:

The path you took to get here has washed out;<sup>2</sup>  
The way forward is still concealed from you.

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<sup>2</sup> Poem, *For The Interim Time*, by John O’Donohue

“The old is not old enough to have died away;  
The new is still too young to be born.”

You cannot lay claim to anything;  
In this place of dusk,  
Your eyes are blurred;  
And there is no mirror.

Everyone else has lost sight of your heart  
And you can see nowhere to put your trust;

MMS:

You know you have to make your own way through.

As far as you can, hold your confidence.  
Do not allow confusion to squander  
This call which is loosening  
Your roots in false ground,  
**That you might come free**  
From all you have outgrown.

What is being transfigured is your mind,  
And it is difficult and slow to become new.  
**The more faithfully you can endure here,**  
The more refined your heart will become

SGB: For your arrival in the new dawn.

MMS: I had said my goodbyes to parish ministry, I had made my peace with that loss. That wasn't what God had in store for my life. Life had taken me down a different path--and God had generously provided me with ways to be in ministry outside the parish that I could have never imagined. It wasn't what I had planned and so I learned to stop making plans. I just went wherever football took us. Following Jesus is not a journey without sudden changes, and unexpected turns. One year ago this coming week, on Valentine's Day, I got an email from Keaton Hill inviting me for a phone interview with the Pastor Nominating Committee. Just a few days prior to that I had never heard of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. And then just a few days after that, Grace Covenant became a place that I felt God pulling me toward. "God works in mysterious ways" sounds so cliché, but friends, it is true. I didn't get myself here. And neither did you.

SGB: I had no intention of leaving New York - of leaving Manhattan, really. The plan was to stay close, stay safe. Navigate a familiar world, a familiar subway line, a familiar path. When my pastor told me about a church down in Asheville that was

seeking to call an associate pastor, I said “Where is that?” That’s was way beyond where I am looking. My pastor looked at me with a sigh, “Why are you trying to limit God’s spirit?” “Huh... I don’t know...” I said. At the moment, I knew he was right. Why was I constructing the path that I wanted for myself - instead of trusting in the one that Christ was preparing out for me? From the moment I arrived through the Grace Covenant doors - I knew I was home. My body belonged here. This is exactly (and unexpectedly) where Christ had been leading me all along - to you. I only needed to let go and trust--and that’s all any of us are asked to do.

### **Closing In Front of Font**

MMS: We will be disoriented, we will feel lost. Brothers and sisters, scripture is not a road map with clear directional signs; and God doesn’t often take us where we thought we’d be. There are conflicting messages, impossible to reconcile contradictions.

SGB: Scripture can make us angry; it can make us feel confused. It can guide us and it can confound us. The life of faith requires struggle, it requires discomfort, it requires radical faith, and trusting in a song we know by heart.

MMS: And maybe that’s just exactly how it should be.

SGB: Because if we were never confounded, bewildered, or disoriented, we would never really know our need for God.

MMS: ... and we might never find where God is calling us to be.

(MMS and SGB walk back up on chancel, put stoles back on)

MMS: And for you and for me, for everyone of us, that is right here, right now.

SGB: And THIS is the Word of the Lord.

MMS: Thanks be to God!

**Congregation and Choir Sings All Verses  
“LORD I WANT TO A CHRISTIAN IN MY HEART”  
(by heart, no hymnal!)**