



“MORE THAN MEETS THE EAR”
SCRIPTURE: DEUTERONOMY 30: 15-20; MATTHEW 5: 21-37
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
February 16, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

30:15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

30:16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

30:17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,

30:18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

30:19 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,

30:20 loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Matthew 5:21-37

5:21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

5:22 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.

5:23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

5:24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

5:25 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.

5:26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

5:27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

5:28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

5:29 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.

5:30 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.

5:31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

5:32 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.

5:33 "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.'

5:34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

5:35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

5:36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

5:37 Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Good morning, Grace Covenant! (Waving hands) Today we will explore a big idea (expansive hand gesture) that can change the world!

How do you feel right now?

Now let's try this again:

Good morning, Grace Covenant! (Hands behind my back) Today we will explore a big idea (diminutive hand gesture) that can change the world!

How do you feel right now?

I said the same words. What was different?

What do you look at first when you encounter someone? (Field answers from congregation)

Studies have shown that we actually look first at hands. This is a human behavior held over from primitive human encounters when seeing if someone had a weapon was the way one knew if this was friend or foe. If I can see your hands I know more about your intention.¹

If we can't see hands we have a primal nervousness about what could be going on. (hands behind back) And the longer we can't see hands the more wary we get. What's going on? What is going to happen?

And when you can see my hands again, you feel some relief, some sense of possibility.

When I say "We will explore a big idea" (diminutive hand gesture) you may feel a bit more skeptical than when I say "We will explore a big idea" (expansive hand gesture) because your brain gives more weight to hand gestures than it does to words (12.5% more weight).²

Words carry only a part of our message. Our bodies are constantly communicating on multiple layers. In fact, the way we feel and the way we carry ourselves are contagious. We catch things from each other—not just viruses, but feelings, emotions, behaviors.

One study placed pads in the armpits of people who ran on a treadmill and then other pads in the armpits of those same volunteers who were skydiving for the first time. Then they had another group of volunteers smell these sweat pads from the two different activities while their brains were being scanned—not knowing what they were smelling.³

When volunteers smelled the sweat pads from the sky diving group, the fear regions in their brains lit up. They had a fear response even when they consciously couldn't report smelling a difference in the two pads. They literally smelled fear with no other context or content beyond the sweat absorbed in a pad by a total stranger.

Emotions are contagious and we are infecting people all the time. And we are being infected and impacted all the time.

Others studies tell us that fake emotions don't have the same impact as authentic emotions. Our facial expressions create a feedback loop that actually changes the way other people feel and the way our own body feels.

Let's try something together.

So a fake smile only engages the bottom half of the face. Let's try that together—a fake smile, like when you aren't really happy about something but you are trying to act like you are. Look around and see how that feels to share and to see.

Now let's try a real authentic smile—that engages all the way up to our eyes, up to the crows feet in the corner of your eyes. All the way into your cheeks. Notice how different that feels.⁴

Having this facial expression increases our own happiness. And it is contagious when we see it in others. In fact, smiling when doing something like exercise can actually tell your body that you are enjoying it, and increase your stamina and trigger more dopamine (pleasure hormone) to be released.

Fake smiles don't spread much at all—researchers in Finland found. But an authentic smile is impactful. Authentic emotions make a more lasting impression on the people we meet and on the way we feel about an interaction.

So because we're all contagious, we also need to pay attention to how we are impacted. It's our "emotional immune system."⁵ That's really our collective emotional intelligence—a combination of awareness of our own emotions and their impact and our awareness about the way others impact us and impact situations.

How do you feel after you talk to certain people? Toxic emotions and behaviors are real, and they have a real impact on us—not just emotionally, but physiologically.

When a context has toxic, inauthentic people, it can literally make us sick, it can literally make us feel wiped out, hopeless, suspicious, alone. When a context has supportive, authentic people, it can make us feel more hopeful, more energized, more relaxed.

Whether you like it or not, you are contagious. And you are susceptible. So, part of our job as church is to be intentional about the way it feels to be together. Speaking of emotional contagion, what is up with Jesus in Matthew's Gospel today?

If this passage was just about the words on the page, it would go down as one of the worst motivational speeches of all time. Jesus' approach to the Ten Commandments is pretty intense. But this passage is about much more than meets the ear.

I actually think this is a passage about emotional intelligence and emotional contagion. Jesus is using a rhetorical device that is more about how you feel than the literal meaning of the words themselves.

If we let the shame emotion get triggered in this passage, we will miss the beauty and gift of Jesus' message to us about our life together. He is inviting us to a deeper place than laws about behavior. He is trying to connect with the crowd about where healthy community must have its foundation—the quality of its relationships.

Let's take a look again at the first 5 verses. You may want to open your Bible and remind yourselves about those first 5 verses—Matthew 5: 21-26. What is Jesus talking about here?

He begins with the commandment not to kill. And then he drills back down to something much more basic—the way we feel about someone. He is talking about dealing with the anger that, when left unaddressed, eventually leads to violence. He is talking about dealing with it when it is just irritating, when it is just sarcasm, when it is just an annoyance.

Jesus is saying that simply not killing people is not enough to fulfill the sacred intention of this law. This law is about anger and about caring enough about each other to talk honestly about the impact of our behavior so that we can stop hurting each other way before we get to the violence of murder.

The whole passage uses shock and absurdity to get us to feel the core quality of emotion that the law is there to help cultivate in our communities. Violence begins in anger—so anger must be dealt with early and often to keep us from violence. Jesus doesn't say don't feel anger; he says acknowledge it and deal with it before it is too powerful, too dangerous.

How about the next series of verses 5:27-5:32? What are these verses about? These are about marriage.

What do you notice here in these verses? There's a lot of extreme language here. What could be going on here? Consider the social context. Women and wives were property in this culture. And there were many allowances for divorce in the Torah—for lots of reasons that created social disadvantage and even life threatening danger

for women. Only men could ask for divorce and they didn't have to have a good reason—a woman could look at her husband wrong, and he could divorce her.

In emerging circles of Jesus followers, women were leaders and some had social capital and means on their own, without the support of a man. Jesus said the quality of our relationships matter—and mutuality matters.

Laws set up to create disadvantage, may be legal, but they are not righteous, they are not fulfilling the spirit of God's law—that we have authentic trust between each other, that we don't willfully harm each other, that we don't see anyone as expendable or as less than worthy of the dignity of being honest and transparent.

It is the quality of our relationships that makes our communities healthy, not simply adherence to rules and laws.

Jesus is asking us to own our own power to cultivate beloved community in the ways we actually feel about each other, not just in the rules we follow.

It's a radical message really—that if heeded could change the world. The way we feel is contagious. We are catching things and spreading things all the time whether we are aware of it or not.

We are connected, interdependent, tangled up with each other and with God—all before we ever even say a word.

Eucharist is about our deep connection and our gratitude for that connection—its about a way of life that is formed and fed by gratitude. And gratitude isn't just a word, it's a disposition, a way of seeing the world that authentically honors our deep connections.

Eucharist is about mystery—the mystery of our Communion with God and with each other when there is enough, when we recognize Christ in our midst in the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup. The Holy Spirit moves and breathes in our community when we truly see each other as beloved, when we authentically allow ourselves to be seen as beloved.

So today we come together in gratitude and mystery without words. You are invited to simply be present, and in the absence of spoken words allow yourself to tune in to all of your senses. What do you see? What do you feel? What are the smells and sounds of a community that comes together trusting that God can heal us and make us more loving, more brave, more truthful.

The absence of words gives us an opportunity not to lapse into hearing what we expect to hear, or to cease to hear from rote repetition.

I invite you to resist the temptation to speak when the silence feels uncomfortable. Just breathe and remember that you are contagious and you are susceptible. Breathe and share in the unspoken support of a community who loves you just as you are. Breathe and remember that your willingness to trust the silence helps everyone around you trust the silence.

Let music and song be our invitation to be present together with sacred intention.

How is it that we want to be contagious? How is it that we want to be susceptible to God's presence, to Christ's promises, to the Holy Spirit's power to transform us?

So that's enough talk. Beloved community is much more than what meets the ear. Beloved community is what meets the heart.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Vanessa Van Edwards, "You Are Contagious," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cef35Fk7YD8>

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2008/dec/04/smell-fear-research-pheromone>

⁴ Edwards TEDx Talk, "You Are Contagious."

⁵ Brandon Smith, "Are Emotions Contagious in the Workplace?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Le9Isb03RY8>