



“You have heard that it was said” Jesus starts. And then he continues: “But I say to you.”

How is this consistent when in our Gospel last week Jesus told us that he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets but rather to fulfill them. At first glance, “You have heard” and “but I say to you” would suggest that Jesus is, in fact, abolishing the past and asking his disciples to look forward into a new way of being.

Does this mean that we can’t even trust Jesus to tell the truth?

I don’t think so. Rather, Jesus is asking us, once again, to look beneath the surface. To look beyond the glib and glitzy. To look beyond how we have always done things. To go deep into the heart of what it means when God loves us and calls us to respect the dignity of every human being.

Jesus echoes what God, through Moses, says to the people. Decide: choose life and prosperity or choose death and adversity. Well, duh! No one I know would choose death and adversity! Or so it would seem at first thought. And yet, you’d be surprised.

To choose life in God’s world means certain choices must be made and lived. Not a once-for-all choice but rather a day-to-day and sometimes moment-to-moment choice. And choosing life has consequences that flow from God’s love to and for us. To choose life includes loving God back. David Lose, senior pastor at Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, tells this story about God’s love for us when considering the reading from Deuteronomy:

Some years ago, a colleague shared with me a story that captures for me how the law – including the laws contained in today’s readings – reveal the parental heart of a God who wants nothing more than the health and happiness of God’s children. My friend, Frank, was about eight years old at the time, when he started arguing with his sister. Before long, arguing turned to pushing and shoving, and, soon enough, Frank had his younger sister pinned to the ground with his fist raised in the air. At that moment, his mother came into the room and told him to stop it. In response, Frank – as he described – reared up as only an eight-year-old can and declared, fist still raised in the air, “She’s my sister. I can do anything I want to her.” At this point, Frank’s mom swooped across the room, towered over him, and said, “She’s my daughter – *no you can’t!*”

That’s the law: God’s gift to protect and care for God’s children. I know we at times feel the negative impact or threat of the law, but it is because God cares so deeply about God’s children...*all* of God’s children. “No you can’t hoard everything. No you can’t discriminate and exclude. No you can’t violate and exploit. Because she is my daughter, and he is my son.”¹

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-6a-on-love-and-law/> (February 11, 2017)

We are – each and every one of us – created by and loved by God. That means if we love God, if we choose life, then we, too, must respect every other creature and perhaps most especially those with whom we disagree. And too often, those who are arrested for abuse and mistreatment have an attitude of the spouse or the child is my property and I can do whatever I want to him or her – and nobody else has the right to stop me. And sometimes that leads to the abuser killing the spouse or child. That’s clearly not ok.

Fortunately, most of us stop short of that kind of attitude and action. We keep our disagreements to words. But there are rules around debate. Any of you who were – or are- debaters know this. Part of the reason for the rules is so that the issues may be fairly and fully considered and a decision reached. The rules clarify for us what is and what isn’t permitted. I ask you to consider the following from a speech given in the Senate. What is important is not who gave the speech but the issues raised.² Here are some of the comments that I ask you to consider in terms of God’s law and our response and responsibility as Christians. The statements include:

“I don't know of a civilization in the history of the world that's been able to solve its problems when half the people in a country absolutely hate the other half of the people in that country.”

* “We are becoming a society incapable of having debate anymore.”

* “We are reaching a point in this republic where we are not going to be able to solve the simplest of issues because everyone is putting themselves in a corner where everyone hates everybody.”

* “What's at stake here tonight . . . is not simply some rule but the ability of the most important nation on earth to debate in a productive and respectful way the pressing issues before it.”

If the law given by God to Moses and then to us is intended for our well-being, then how can we truly choose life if we hate others simply because they hold a different position than we do? When we’ve gone beyond disagreeing into actually hating the other for holding a different position than we do.

God’s love is intended to give us a framework on how to live a life worth living. God’s law is intended to help us live in community with one another. Jesus speaks to us and encourages us to go deeper than words on a page (or a scroll in his time).

Jesus wants us to link our lives, to live our values, in ways that honor each other. Part of what we do as church is to be a community of faith. We look to our Scriptures, we look to our Tradition, and we look to our experience, including our reason, to learn and discern how to go forward.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/09/marco-rubio-just-gave-a-really-important-speech-but-almost-no-one-paid-attention/?utm_term=.54c663dbcac4 (February 11, 2017)

Learning to live – and then living – in ways that are consistent with the commandments and the teachings of Jesus is a life-long process. Just as Paul reminded the Corinthians, as infants in Christ we are fed milk. We learn the stories of our faith in age-appropriate ways. As we grow in our faith, we can delve deeper into the mysteries of faith. Into the many ways in which Scripture is multi-valent: subject to more than one meaning. And yet, because learning to walk with God is a process, Paul reminds us that there is still jealousy and quarreling among us which keeps us from truly being able to choose life.

Choosing life means engaging with things around you. Things around you have a way of getting messy from time to time. Tempers flare. Well-intentioned promises are broken. “White lies” are told, usually for our own convenience and to avoid a potential confrontation. Each of these can divide us from others and ultimately from God. If we lie to each other, then why wouldn’t we lie to God (or at least try to lie to God)? How many of you heard a parent say something along the lines of: whatever you do I can forgive you but not if you lie to me? Why is it that lying is the one sin that is so hard to forgive?

Perhaps it is because lying breaks our trust in the other person. If you lie to me about “x” then how can I trust what you say about “y”? When we don’t trust each other, it is impossible to build community. Yes, we may have a surface gathering, but we sure do not have a community with depth. We do not have a community that will hold you up when your world comes crashing down. We do not have a community that God desires.

When we break each other’s hearts, or our hearts are broken by another through lying, deceit or simply obliviousness, Jesus tells us to go and be reconciled to the other and then return to the altar. The altar is where we lay our needs and our thanks before God. It is one place we can be sure that God meets us, ready to pour out God’s grace and love upon us. But if we carry to the altar our grievances against another, it will be hard to open our hearts to God. It is hard to choose life when we are consumed by disputes against another. God needs our open hearts to help us to choose and frame a life focused on God.

Our Collect urges us to put our trust in God because it is God who gives us the grace to do what is needful to be reconciled to those we have hurt or those who have hurt us. It is God who has offered us the commandments as the baseline of a way to live that honors God and love neighbor. We see in Jesus that the commandments are a starting – and not an ending – place. It is our choice – among the greatest gifts that God has given to us is free choice. To live a life of integrity or to choose to turn away and worship contemporary idols who cannot help us when the chips are down. Free choice to understand that “you have heard it said” and “I tell you that” are ways that we can grow deeper in our relationship with God and neighbor so that our world becomes a better place.

It takes work. It may require some sacrifices: some turning away from the world with its appeal and message that we can stand on our own. That we need what the world wants to give us rather than what God offers. In the end, what the world offers ends and too often ends in destruction and negativity. What God offers ends where it begins: with love. **Amen.**