

Matters of the Heart

By: Karen Scherer

February 16, 2020. Guest pastor Karen Scherer preaches today on the law. Throughout the scriptures, the law is to be taken to heart and not only outwardly observed. In talking about anger, adultery, and divorce, Jesus teaches that it is one thing to behave according to the law, and another thing entirely for one's heart to be oriented toward love and mercy.

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Let us pray. Come to us, Holy Spirit. Open our hearts and minds that we might hear your word for us today, the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.

So I think it's a wonderful coincidence that Valentine's Day was just two days ago and that our readings this morning, two of them anyway, are all about matters of the heart. In Deuteronomy, as the people prepare to enter the Promised Land, the Lord through Moses sets before the people a very clear choice: if you obey the commandments of the Lord by loving the Lord your God, walking in God's ways, then you shall live, become numerous, and God will bless you. But if your hearts turn away and you serve other gods then you shall perish, and your days of living in the Promised Land will be short. If your hearts turn away. Where your heart is shapes your whole life -- your attitude, your actions, where you invest your time, your money, your efforts. It's all about the heart. Obedience, following God's commands, walking in God's ways, blessings, curses, choices -- it's all about the heart.

Do you remember that first blush of new love for that someone special, when you were so in love with another one? You would have done anything for them because you loved them. But as that love matures over time, if it matures, then you come to know that it's not just about that feeling, that feeling for them. It's about walking with them, being with them, being committed to them, through life together. It's about commitment, about a covenant with them, those vows that you made whether they were official or not. You committed yourself to one another. It's about honoring them, caring for them, even when they are unlovable. Tom Long states that what lies at the heart of God -- and is at the heart of the law -- is in fact a committed covenantal relationship. The law is based on God's commitment to humankind, to y'all, and on our commitment to community with one another. It's all about relationship. It's more than going through the motions. It's a matter of the heart, a commitment of being, walking with, caring for, trusting the other.

Today we hear the law. Jesus teaches us. And as I looked at your faces as I was reading that, I was looking at not good news on your faces. But he teaches us about God's intention -- God's intention for us as beloved, honored children of God. And this is not new to Jewish thinking. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures the law is to be taken to heart and not only outwardly observed. It is to affect not just our behaviors, but our attitudes and our emotions as well, for they are where our heart is too, and where God seeks to live in us. It is one thing to behave according to the law, Jesus says. It is another thing entirely for one's heart to be oriented toward love and mercy. Jesus connects the dots for us from outward acts to internal orientation. He goes from murder to anger, from adultery to lust, from divorce to responsibility and accountability. It is possible to abide by the letter of the law and still wreak havoc on the lives of others. That's what he's wanting us to hear: where it comes from. That we can carry out the law, and our heart can be so twisted.

Let me give you some examples. We can pat ourselves on the back for not committing murder while we

ruin the reputation of a coworker through our words. We even call it "stabbing someone in the back." We can do business in ways that are completely legal, but that leave our workers destitute and unhealthy, and maintain policies that ravage our environment -- but we have broken no laws. We can pat ourselves on the back for not committing adultery, and yet what we find is our primary relationships end up being maybe about work, or sports, or entertaining ourselves, or even the internet, rather than our spouse, from whom we are absent much of the time -- and thus unfaithful. It is possible to lead nations and corporations and businesses and organizations in ways that are legally sanctioned, but that serve only ourselves, and leave others broken. And it is easy to apply the law as a weapon to judge others, whether it be religious or secular law, to learn to use it with lethal accuracy, and to manipulate the world to our own agendas with it. But when we do this, when we do these things, the law becomes incomplete at the very least, and broken -- a shadow of the glorious glue that it was created to be.

You see the law was created to bring order out of chaos, to create community -- that we could live with one another and care for one another, in relationship to one another that is good and life-giving, even as our relationship with God would be good and life-giving, trusting. That's why Jesus moves his hearers' understanding of the law from the realm of the *letter* of the law, to the realm of the *heart* of the law. It's not enough, Jesus says, to avoid murder. You also have to treat each other with respect and caring. Calling another names, awful names, demeans and diminishes you and those whom God loves: his children. And we don't want to hear this but yes, it brings judgment upon ourselves when we do that. It ends cutting us off from God, whose intention was very different. And we cut ourselves off from each other. I would urge you to go back to Luther's Small Catechism. How many of you have read the Small Catechism? If you haven't, pull it out, give it to somebody else, get it, get them a copy. In his Small Catechism and his explanation of the Ten Commandments, he talks about how the law is not only following it by the letter, but in fact extending it out. For example, not bearing false witness against your neighbor for Luther isn't simply about avoiding lying. It's also about putting the best construction on what a neighbor says or has done, and in this way tending to the communal relationships that simultaneously constitute and bound our Christian life together. It's about going beyond.

We risk everything, people -- judgment and disconnection from God and one another and yes, even from ourself, from whom we were created to be -- when our heart is only oriented towards ourself. The Kingdom of God is much more than following rules. It's about the heart. And dare I say: if it's up to us, if we truly examine ourselves, then we are lost. Humankind is lost. Our individual heart is not big enough and our collective heart is not strong enough to fully complete the law, because our heart is not in it. But God's is. Ultimately, it is God's heart and God's heart alone that saves us. And that heart is made known to us in the flesh and blood of a human being called Jesus Christ, child of God. In him God was born among us, as the prophets had spoken and in fulfilling the promise of God. In him, God made flesh walked with us, truly saw us, and sought to teach us and to heal us, to heal our broken hearts, our twisted selves. He fulfilled the law to its fullest measure -- not twisting it to serve his own purposes, but giving himself in full commitment, full commitment to save us, by facing the powers and principalities of this world. Facing them not with violence, but with the giving of himself, with faithfulness to God and mercy upon us, freeing us, on that cross basically saying to us: you are set free from my love and my mercy. And God raised him from the dead. Thus, overcoming death and fear, we don't have to fear death. We don't have to fear those little deaths that others or the world tries to put on us, because we know that God loves us. In Christ Jesus we are set free.

Jesus is the heart of God now, who teaches us with his word and empowers us with his spirit, who reorders the relationships of this world, of this community, and reorients our hearts, the internal landscape of our lives, reorients us toward God and God's love -- not what the world is trying to put on us, but what God is giving us. God is giving us God's heart for us to live out of, to live for all, not just

ourselves. That's what happens when you are baptized. That spirit dwells in you. God's intention dwells in you, and it is always there in forgiveness and mercy, so that you may then give mercy and forgiveness. It is the spirit of Christ's heart, who is ever working to renew our hearts daily, moment to moment, to take away that curved-in self and open us up to others, and the pain and the hurt we see there. And then accompany us on a path of sacrifice and faith and love. The law is now opened up for us, and we are freed to be all that God dreamed for us to be. And in our trials, God through Christ grants us mercy. For we are not yet what we are meant to be. That is true. But we know that we are forgiven and freed to live without the fear of judgment, and to be filled with hope and promise.

So we can ask forgiveness from a coworker whose reputation we may have spoiled with our words. We can do business in ways that care for our workers, though it may take some sacrifice on our part. We can develop policies that care for our environment, even as we care for those around us. We can find ways to live on less, and find that we have more of what really counts. We can commit ourselves to spending as much quality time as possible with our spouses, as much at least as we commit to ourselves as well, knowing that we must care for ourselves, too. We get to work toward a nation that lifts up the broken hearted, the poor. A nation that cares for the alien, the stranger, the widow and the orphan, and gives respect and dignity and worth to everyone. That's our calling. We get to do these things without fear, knowing that God is for us. And we can live with the hope and promise of life now and in the time to come, the life given to us in Christ Jesus. That's the heart of the matter. You are the heart of the matter in the world. So happy Valentine's Day, people of heart. Christ's heart lives in you.

So may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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